

博多豚骨 ラーメンズ

HAKATA TONKOTSU RAMENS

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Hakata Tonkotsu Ramens

vol.6

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木崎ちあき
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Seasonal Opening Ceremony

One day in late September during the climax of the pennant race for professional baseball.

“Lin! What was ya doin’!?”

Someone shouted in Hakata dialect, his yell echoing in the baseball stadium in Fukuoka.

The owner of the voice was a regular player for the Hakata Tonkotsu Ramens grass-lot baseball team as the one protecting second-base – Zenji Banba.

“You got no reason to miss that!”

The person subjected to Banba’s anger was his partner, Xianming Lin. “Shut up. Don’t yell at me.” He replied back boldly.

Today was one of their practice games. The opposing team was made of regular people, and the Tonkotsu Nine were struggling with a pitcher with an irregular form. They were unable to hit one and could not get any points. They were tantalizingly unable to make many hits.

The score was one to two once the eighth inning ended. They managed to keep the lead with Saitou’s pitching strength. However, in the top of the ninth inning, they got two outs and there was trouble at third base. The batter had hit a ground ball. It was an easy catch, but the shortstop, Lin, had tried to catch it. The ball passed between his legs. Two runners made it home. The score was now three to two. They had lost the advantage in the last moments of the game.

Saitou paled seeing Lin’s fatal error. Even their coach Genzo Gouda gripped his head in shame.

Banba started yelling harsh words at him. “They came from behind because of you! How ‘bout you reflect on your mistake!”

“Haa?” Lin glared back and shouted. “I’m not the only one to blame! It was the pitcher who had allowed the ball to get hit!”

“Dontcha put the blame on others!”

“Ha! Says the guy who got out with three strikes so easily.”

“Whatcha say!?”

The middle-fielders began to argue between the first and second base.

“Hey, come on now,” the first baseman, José Martinez, quickly ran up to them to try and pacify them. “Calm down, you two.”

It was always his job to stand between them and break up the fight when they were worked up like this. Whenever a fight broke out, Martinez was the first to take action. He was a kind and dependable man for his friends.

“Don’t nag at me for making a little error!”

“That ain’t little! If we lose, it’s your fault!”

“You shouldn’t blame others either! You batted three times and never once got a hit!”

“Wha-, why you...!”

“Hey, don’t fight.” Banba and Lin had grabbed one other by the collar, and Martinez pulled them apart and stated, shrugging. “I’ll make up the one point difference by hitting a homerun.”

The two reluctantly released their grip on each other and broke apart. After Martinez managed to calm them down, the match restarted. They were able to get an out with a fast ground ball, and the Tonkotsu Nine returned to the benches.

The Ramens would have their final turn at offence in the bottom of this inning. The batting order would start with Enokida.

“If one of you get out there, Mar’s turn will come around. We gotta get the fourth batter in there.”

The nine players formed a circle in front of the benches. The speaker was their coach Genzo.

“We’re gonna turn this game around in this inning!”

‘Yeah!’ The nine of them shouted back in high spirits.

They broke up and went into positions. The first batter Enokida went into the batter’s box. The second batter Yamato was getting ready in the next batter’s circle. The third batter Banba began practicing his swing in front of the benches. Everyone was focused, determined to make sure the fourth batter – their slugger – would get to bat.

Lin was making a sullen face, watching them from the benches. He was the seventh to bat. His turn would not come for awhile. In fact, there was a high possibility he would not bat.

“Hey.”

Lin spoke to the coach Genzo beside him.

“The fourth batter is the best in the team, isn’t it?”

He had dabbled with a sudden thought that came to him.

There was a tendency for the fourth batter to be the strongest hitter in the baseball sport. In professional baseball, usually foreign players brought from the Americas were resigned to be the fourth batter. The Ramens’ fourth batter was also someone from the Dominican Republic – Martinez. He had a large muscular body, over two meters tall, and had thick arms. He had the physique to easily send a ball flying afar.

“Yeah, in a way,” Genzo nodded ambiguously.

“There are lots of ways to define a good batter, but the fourth batter is the one who becomes the team’s pillar.”

“Then why isn’t the fourth batter the first to go?”

Lin did not ask this to question his coach’s choice on their batting order. He was just curious.

“If you have the best batter up first, he would get more turns to bat.”

Lin thought if it was arranged that way, the number of times the strongest batter would bat would increase, and they could get more points.

However, that was apparently not the case. Genzo shook his head and grinned.

“The important role the fourth batter has to do is to make a chance for others and to rack up points.”

Genzo explained that no matter how much endurance the fourth player had, not all of their hits were going to be home runs. And it would be difficult for him to solely score points. Baseball was a sport where nine people were needed, and not just for defense; for offense as well. For the fourth batter to get their team the most points, they needed runners preceding him. If any of the three batters before him make it to a base, the fourth batter’s turn would come around, giving them a chance. The batting order was arranged so the players with the highest chances of making hits and getting to bases were first to further increase the possibility of getting more points.

Genzo pointed to Enokida over in the batter’s box. “The first batter has to make it to a base.”

Hence Enokida was the first to bat because of his high chance in getting on base.

“The second batter will make a bunt, and if the runner can get to the next base with a hit-and-run or with a steal that’d be even better.”

The second batter, Yamato, was a skilled player who specialized in making subtle maneuvers. And then connecting with the next batter, the third one up was Banba – a mid-distance batter. He was good batting on the right side and could hit far. He was fast, so there was little risk in attempting a double play.

“Each one of them play a role.”

Genzo explained to him that the three best batters in the Ramens were put first so they could have the best chance to get the fourth batter up to bat.

“So you’re saying one person isn’t enough for offense?”

“Correct,” Genzo nodded. “That’s what baseball is.”

The other team’s pitcher had finished practicing, and the Ramens’ offense began. Enokida made it on base with a foul ball. Genzo did not make a sign, but Yamato went for a safety bunt. He ended up getting out, but Enokida made it to the next base.

“They know what their roles are.” Genzo stated while watching the player standing in the batter’s box. “The fourth batter’s role is to save the team out of a pinch.”

“Lin, don’t worry about that error.”

Martinez had been practicing his swings in front of the benches and turned around to face Lin and placed his large palm on Lin’s head.

“Leave the rest to me.”

After he gave him a smirk, he headed to the next batter’s circle.

“...It’s not like it was bothering me,” Lin replied back, casting his gaze downward.

The third batter, Banba, had hit the ball between the first and second base, but the ball was caught. Nonetheless, Enokida made it to third base.

They had two outs and one person on third. They had the chance to level out the points with this next hit.

And finally the fourth batter Martinez’s turn had come. The opponent’s pitcher looked exhausted as he had been pitching all the way until the ninth inning. The pitcher must have let his guard down as he made a careless pitch to Martinez. It was a fast strike in the dead center, and Martinez would not pass that up. He made a full swing with such force they could hear the fierce rush of the wind as

the bat hit the ball back.

The white ball flew high into the refreshing autumn sky. The Tonkotsu Nine hung out of the benches, watching the trajectory of the ball. The ball made a large arch and disappeared beyond the grounds. It was a home run hit out of the park.

The pitcher hung his head on the mound. Martinez tossed aside his bat and pointed to the benches – to Lin. “Did you see that? I did it. Like I said I would.” He stated with a proud expression. He then made a fist and raised it in the air. Martinez leisurely ran around the diamond.

Genzo smiled as he applauded his feats. “I reckon’ you can say the fourth’s batter’s role is to also push the team through when the scores are close.” Enokida had returned home from the third base. The Tonkotsu Nine gathered around the home plate and welcomed Martinez. They finished the game with two runs and a home run. The score was three to four. The singular swing from their slugger had saved their team.

First Inning

Top of the First Inning

Veracruz was the largest port city in the country facing the Gulf of Mexico and was a prominent resort spot. A five and six hour drive out from the capitol would bring you to a desert where dry cactus were growing in and a view of the southern part of the country covered with palm trees. The city, where summer was everlasting and was endowed in its unique culture, was overflowing with people all across central America and just as many tourists from other countries there. It looked like a peaceful tourist city at first glance, but underneath there were constant bloodshed from skirmishes among drug dealing organizations. The 'Los Eses' was a rising drug cartel based in Veracruz. It was a multi-national criminal organization that was newly formed in this city, after a handful of surviving members of the Veracruz Cartel was dismantled nine years ago and had members more multiple countries than just Mexico. The drug lord Ramiro Sanchez was serving his time in jail presently, so they spent every waking moment fighting opposing organizations and the police in order to protect his turf.

The Los S's members consisted of former military personnel, former police officers, and hitmen. All of them were given code names starting from the number one, such as S-1 (Ese Uno), S-2 (Ese Dos). The S letter to their names was based off of the boss of the Veracruz Cartel: the initial for Sanchez.

S-1 – also known as Uno – headed to a warehouse which served as their hideout in Veracruz. He was one of the few members from Japanese descent in the organization as well as a former member of the Veracruz Cartel. After a few minutes of driving, he could see the hideout. It was a white building. And in the vacant spot of land right next to it, several members of the cartel were playing soccer. It was laughable to watch grown-up men running around innocently like a child, but upon closer examination Uno noticed they were not kicking a soccer ball; they were kicking a human's severed head. It was the head of a journalist they had killed the other day.

"Hey, Ocho."

Uno called out to the man aiming to shoot the head into the goal as he got out

of the car. “Come over here for a minute.” He beckoned him over.

Ocho had missed. The Mexican wore a straw fedora, an awful looking Hawaiian shirt and faded colored jeans. “What do you want? This is the worst timing.” He strode over to Uno while muttering complaints.

This man named Ocho – S-8 – was the eighth member to join the Los Eses. He was formerly a police officer in Mexico, but he was let go for being corrupt and became a drug smuggler. Since his wife was Japanese, he was able to speak Japanese as well. He tended to carelessly insert himself in people’s business, but he was qualified enough for their next job.

“You’re going with us to Japan. Orders from the boss.”

Uno stated.

“Is it for *that* plan?” Ocho asked while stroking his beard.

The plan he was referring to was the advancement to Asia. Uno – a Japanese descendant – was chosen to go as a representative member to be dispatched to Japan.

“Yeah, it is.”

“Got it. I’ll get ready.”

Uno watched Ocho turn and walk away before heading inside the building. Inside, there were large crates of drugs and weapons stored in the spacious warehouse.

Uno went up to one of the nearby members and asked. “Hey, where is Quatro?”

“Quatro went to Colombia.” The man replied. “He said he went to buy a submarine for smuggling.”

That was the first time Uno had heard about it. “What? When will he be back?”

“Don’t know. He probably won’t be back for another week.”

This isn’t good, Uno sighed. He was planning to leave for Japan right away. He could not wait a week for him.

I guess I’ll just have to find someone else to come along in his place. Uno looked around the area to find a stand-in. There was a boxing match going on in an open space further inside the warehouse. Other members were engaged in combat while everyone else was betting 500 pesos on who would win. They had rules set where they could use weapons if they chose to; the fighting served as combat practice, a past time, as well as entertainment, but since all the

members were ruffians many were left heavily injured and teetering on life and death after the matches.

Presently, S-12 (Ese Doce) stood in the ring, proud of having the best arm strength within the organization. He was ranked as the third most popular among the Los Eses members, and everyone was betting on him, the tough guy from Honduras. His opponent was someone Uno did not recognize. The man was young, long and slender and wore a Panama hat with sunglasses.

“Hey, who is that guy?”

Uno asked, pointing to the man.

“He’s the newbie – Treinta.” One of the men collecting the bid money replied while counting the bills. “This is his debut fight too; what terrible luck.”

S-30. Uno recalled hearing that a new member whose nationality was unknown had joined their ranks recently. *So that’s him? According to rumors, he’s a hitman who uses a blade, but just how strong is he?*

Uno observed Treinta. Facing a match while wearing sunglasses showed guts. Usually people would take them off. If they got hit and the lens broke, the fragments could pierce them in the eye after all. *Is Treinta an idiot who doesn’t think? Or does he have the confidence that he won’t be hit in the face?*

Uno watched the fight until the end to judge the newcomer’s ability. The two men raised up their fists, facing each other. The battle began at the referee’s signal.

Treinta moved the second the match started. He was swift. He remained low as he snuck under Doce and punched him in the face from below. Doce’s large body staggered when Treinta’s fist struck his nose.

His comrades surrounding the ring as spectators roared in encouragement.

“¡Vamos!” “¡Buen hecho!” There was also foulmouthed jeering. “¡Concha tu madre!”

Although Doce had the most bets to win this fight he was entirely on the defensive. Treinta was relentless in his attacks even as his opponent was fainting in agony. He punched him in the temple, throat, and solar plexus before kicking him in the stomach and shin. His movements were precise and quick-witted, as though he knew a person’s weak points. *Was this man part of a special military force in the past?*

Treinta was strong. He had power to his slim figure. His finishing punch to the

man's side was fierce. Doce spat up blood and collapsed onto the ground. He fell face first, fists still clenched tight. His body shook in small tremors as he tried to stand up, bearing the pain. Sweat covered his forehead.

"Give up," Treinta stated quietly in a low voice. "You probably can't move anymore from the pain."

It was exactly as he said. Doce could not move. He was unable to fight back the pain and ran out of strength.

"The victor is Treinta!" The referee shouted.

There was an uproar in the next moment. The members of Los Eses gave loud applause in celebration of the Dark Horse's arrival. The loser, Doce, was unable to stand up still. A few bones in his body had to be broken.

"Hey, take Doce to the hospital."

Uno ordered the referee before pointing to Treinta. "And you over there."

He could use a strong person like him. Uno decided he would have him join.

"You'll be going to Fukuoka with us."



A few days later, Uno, Ocho and Treinta flew from Mexico to Australia. They then took a ship to smuggle their large quantities of drugs to Fukuoka, camouflaged as an Australian produced beef freighter.

"Ahh, we're finally here."

It was a long trip.

Once they arrived in Fukuoka City, Ocho got up when they landed to stretch and remarked. "I still feel like I'm on the ocean."

Uno also got off the ship. He then looked around the area. He did not see Treinta anywhere. ".....Hey, where's Treinta?"

"He's puking his guts out over there." Ocho pointed with his thumb over to the ship.

Uno saw the man's trademark Panama hat beside the freighter. Treinta was keeling over. He had gotten seasick and was puking over into the ocean.

"¡Oye, Treinta!" Uno called out to him in a large voice. "Si, estoy bien." Even as Treinta replied back that he was okay, his face was completely pale. Even though this man was strong, he was useless on sea.

“Hey, Uno. Why did you bring him along? He’s not much use if he can’t speak Japanese.” Ocho said, displeased. “There had to have been other guys, right? Like Quatro.”

“Quatro was busy with business negotiations.”

“Business negotiations?”

“He went to Colombia to purchase a narco-submarine.”

“Seriously? He could just do that later.”

Uno shrugged. “Don’t say that. If he could get us that submarine, we could smuggle several tons of product in just one trip. There’d be less risks of us getting caught by the police, and Treinta wouldn’t have to puke his guts out as much. It works in our favor.”

“I think he’s going to be sick on a submarine too.”

They still had to use the fishing boat they bought earlier to get to the warehouse they would be moving their smuggled goods to near the Hakata pier. Then they would have to wait for someone looking to distribute their drugs. They did not have the time to take extended breaks.

Once Treinta recovered from his sea-sickness, Uno barked, “*vamos*,” and the three took off.

Bottom of the First Inning

Bayside Place Hakata was a shopping complex facing Hakata Bay. The spacious plot of land naturally had shops and restaurants as well as a cylinder aquarium tank and a passenger terminal; the place was crowded with families and foreign visitors on the weekends. Right next to the building there was a park, a futsal stadium, onsen, and stone saunas.

Today was a clear, sunny day. The palm trees growing alongside the road were swaying in the ocean breeze, making their leaves rustle. The scenery reminded Martinez of the southern countries. He felt nostalgia, recalling his times he spent in his motherland the Dominican Republic and the cities he went to along the coast of Mexico during his youth.

The moment he had stepped foot in the place and saw the red conning tower directly next to the Bayside Place – the Hakata Port Tower – in his peripheral view, he sensed the faint smell of salt. There were passengers getting on a liner to a remote island at the port right now.

Martinez walked further into the building. He passed by the fish tank in the

center of the room, which had various colored fish, stingrays, and sea turtles swimming around elegantly in it, and entered a cafe. After he ordered plain waffles and iced coffee he looked around the interior of the shop.

He had plans to meet with Enokida in this cafe today, and the man had already gotten here before he did. Martinez spotted his platinum blond mushroom hair in a corner of the shop and walked over to him.

“Sorry for being late.”

When Martinez called out to him, Enokida raised his head and looked over in his direction. He was in the middle of eating waffles topped with bananas and chocolate ice cream and had fresh whipped cream stuck to the corner of his thin lips.

“Hey,” Enokida raised a hand in reply. “I went ahead and started eating without you.”

“That’s fine; I don’t care.”

Martinez pointed to the corner of his lip as he sat down across from the other. Enokida understood his gesture and wiped the cream off from his lips and licked it off his fingertips before asking. “What’s been going on recently? Has there been any changes?”

He asked the usual questions.

“Nothing in particular.” Martinez sighed. “I don’t have anything of interest for you. I’ve been off lately.”

“*Still are*, correct?”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. I’m really in a tight spot. If you got someone looking for a torturer, refer them to me.”

Enokida was a hacker and informant, and Martinez was a torturer who made people give him information. As such, the two would occasionally meet up and have a meal to exchange information. But eighty percent of the time they ended up chatting idly.

“By the way, you were great in that last game. Nice batting you did there.”

They began this day with idle talk as well. Enokida was referring to the Ramens’ practice game the week before.

“We won because of you. And you saved Lin-kun as well.”

“No, it was because you set it up for us to win.” Martinez shook his head. He was not being modest; he was being sincere.

It was his hit that had decided the match, however he was able to have a turn at bat and make the points because of the batters before him. It was not a singular person's victory; it was a team victory.

"Mar-san, you seem to be in good condition recently." Enokida grinned. "Are you doping?"

"Hell no."

Martinez rejected. That reminded him that a former baseball player was arrested for drug use the other day. He stuffed his mouth full of the waffles and replied back while chewing, "I hate drugs."

"Speaking of drugs."

Enokida's tone suddenly turned serious.

"What is it?"

"You're wanted internationally."

Martinez's eyes widened. He accidentally spat out the coffee he just drank. He frowned and asked again. "Sorry, what?"

"You're wanted internationally." Enokida repeated. "You know of the ICPO, right?"

ICPO (International Criminal Police Organization) – also known as Interpol – was an international organization for investigators in every country around the world to exchange information and cooperate to find criminals that fled their country or missing people. Martinez knew that much about them at least.

"I was messing around and hacked into ICPO's database and saw your old name on there. You're wanted for your past crimes."

There were too many that would apply for his 'past crimes.'

"Mar-san, you sure were wild in your younger days."

Enokida smirked at him. "Isn't that always the case for every man?" Martinez replied with a smile.

"So what do you plan to do?"

"Nothing much."

Martinez answered, shrugging.

"Isn't Interpol just guys who exchange information? It's not like they have independent investigation teams nor do they have the power to investigate at the border. They don't have my new name or know that I live in this city, so there's nothing they can do."

As long as Martinez did not run into someone who knew his true identity and he does not get reported to the ICPO, he should not get captured.

“That’s how it was in the past, but I’m not so sure about how they are now,” Enokida whispered.

Martinez stuffed the rest of his waffles into his mouth, the flavor instantly lost, and chugged down his coffee.

“Besides,” Martinez added. “The police doesn’t have time to bother with someone small like me.”



“...I got nothing to do.”

Lin muttered to himself, bored.

On the third floor of a multi-tenant building located east of Hakata Station a few minutes away from the Chikushi exit in the Hakata ward, Lin was watching television for the past couple of hours lying down on the sofa in the Banba Detective Office. He had no assassination jobs today and did not have anything in particular to do. He accepted to stay in the office while Banba was out, but he did not sense any clients coming by. And the dull hours seemed like it would continue to tick by still.

After Lin wasted time watching the variety program, a new corner began involving the introductory tips for cleaning for housewives.

Lin suddenly remembered as he looked away from the TV and around the room.

“...Guess I’ll do some cleaning.”

He muttered and stood up.

Even though Lin would periodically clean up the place, the room would always get dirty almost immediately after. It was all because of his roommate. Banba was terrible at cleaning up after himself and would leave things out everywhere.

There were cup ramen and convenience store bento boxes and utensils left out on the table, and trash littered the floor. Piles of dishes were stacked up in the kitchen sink. His baseball attire and gear were laying around the room, and piles of books which looked like they would fall over at any moment were on Banba’s desk.

Lin took out a garbage bag and threw away anything they did not need in it. As he was going around collecting garbage, he tossed the dirty laundry into the laundry basket.

Just as he began to clean the area around Banba's desk, he noticed something. "...What is this?"

Lin spotted a baseball on the desk that was cluttered with stacks of books. It was a hardball for practice, but it seemed fairly old.

"This ball is gross....."

The entire body was yellow and had black smudges on it left from a bat.

This baseball could not be used in practice matches. "Guess I'll throw it out." Lin aimed for the trash can in the corner of the room and threw it.

The ball made an arch in the air. However, it struck the edge of the trash can and fell between the furniture.

Shit, Lin tutted. *I guess I'll pick it up later*. He sighed and went to take out the vacuum cleaner.



Ricardo waited for the dealer in a restaurant bar on the tenth floor of JR Hakata City. The restaurant had the American aesthetic, his home country. Cheerful country music played in the background, making him feel nostalgic. There were two men sitting in the booth next to his, conversing about baseball with a beer in hand. They seemed to be watching the live broadcast on the television set up in the restaurant.

After drinking his Heineken by himself for a few minutes, the person he was waiting on finally came. He was a Japanese man named Yakuin. He had a rare name, but he looked like any other ordinary man in his middle age.

"Sorry to make you wait. Murakami."

Yakuin called him by his name.

Ricardo was half Mexican and half Japanese and was going by the fake name Murakami at the moment. His official nationality was American, but he had been born and raised in Japan. Ricardo prompted Yakuin to have a drink as he sat down across from him. He would be treating him today as well. He needed Yakuin to loosen his tongue by consuming alcohol. After Yakuin had drank his

first beer and ordered his second, Ricardo went to discuss business. “Do you have it?”

“I have it all ready for you.”

Yakuin tapped a black handbag he placed next to him. There was a see-through bag with stimulants inside. The product was from the Noma Group.

The Noma Group was a subgroup of a gang that made money off of drugs, and the organization particularly had the Nakasu neighborhood under their turf. They mainly produced and smuggled stimulants, synthesized drugs and synthetic cannabis and had them distributed throughout Japan by using couriers.

Yakuin was a freelance dealer who had connections to various other organizations than just the Noma Group. He would purchase drugs from multiple people and sell them to his clients. Ricardo was one of his clients.

“I got 100 grams in here.” Yakuin told him and reached for his glass. “How much do you want?”

“All of it.”

Ricardo immediately answered. The other man was slightly shocked. “Are you serious?”

“I have the money for it.”

Ricardo put an attache case containing 7,000,000 in it onto the table.

Yakuin glanced at the case and remarked. “...Business seems to be going well for you. Did you get new clients?”

“I got a wealthy woman hooked on this. She’s been bothering me to get her more drugs as fast as possible.” That was a huge lie.

“Is that so?” Yakuin grinned. “What a lady killer you are.”

The deal was done. After they exchanged the bag with the drugs and the suitcase with the money inside it, they finally touched their food.

Yakuin spoke again as he stuffed his face with Asian beef. “Do you know about the dispute between the Noma Group and a Chinese dealing group?”

“I heard rumors of it.” Ricardo replied. He did not know the details. His goal today was to get that information from him. “What kind of guys are they?”

Yakuin started to chatter more after his fifth drink. “They’re just a rogue group consisted of Chinese people in Fukuoka. They seem to have connections with an organization in Hong Kong, meaning there’s a possibility they have someone

backing them.”

China had harsh penalties for selling and purchasing drugs in its country. There were even cases people could get executed if they were caught having it. Because of that, there were people who wanted to make a market for it in other countries.

“Are they big?”

“No. They don’t even have ten people. Anyway, this Chinese group has had its operations going on nearby. They were mainly distributing stimulants, but now they started giving out coke and heroin.”

Ricardo cocked his head. Another new organization had crept up behind his back?

“Cocaine and heroin aren’t even that popular in Japan, right?”

“Yeah. So they’ve been selling it to foreigners living in Fukuoka. They’ve been handing them out in clubs in Nakasu where the foreigners go to. But that area is the Noma Group’s turf. I heard someone from the Noma Group spotted them selling the drugs over there and have tortured the Chinese guy for it.”

“Uh-huh.”

There was no way they would stop selling the drugs just because one of their men got tortured. The dispute between the two groups will worsen, Ricardo thought.

“The Noma Group is worked up right now as well. It’s been hectic over there, as they’ve been caught up with another issue.”

“What had happened?”

“A few of their men had been killed.”

“What? In a fight?”

“Maybe.”

Ricardo shrugged. “How hard it is to be a yakuza.”

“On top of that, one of their couriers got caught.”

Ricardo knew about that already, but he purposefully made himself look shocked. “What? Are you serious?”

“Yeah, apparently they got a weasel.”

A weasel – Ricardo’s heart thudded when the other mentioned that term.

Ricardo reached for his food while calming himself. “That seems problematic.”

“Yeah, no kidding.” Yakuin nodded, looking over at him. “Say, is there anyone

that comes to mind that you find suspicious?”

After pretending to ponder over it for a few moments, Ricardo shook his head.

“...No, I have no idea.”

“I see.”

Yakuin nodded in disappointment.

“The Noma Group is desperately trying to find the traitor. The moment they do, they’ll probably kill them.”

“I was put into prison once.” Ricardo gulped down the chilled Heineken and grimaced. “I feel like if I get caught again, I won’t be out for a long time. If we don’t catch the traitor soon, I can’t do business feeling safe.”

“Right?”

“When you get the next batch, let me know.”

After he had left a tip for the drinks and took the bag, Ricardo quickly walked out of the restaurant.



Banba returned after Lin had spent four hours cleaning the place up to the point the office looked entirely new. The date had already changed by then. Banba was in good spirits, probably due to drinking out somewhere. “I’m hooome~!” Lin made an exasperated face seeing his roommate come back in an overly good mood and replied, “welcome back. You were late. Where did you go?”

“I gone out drinkin’ with Shigematsu-san.” Banba provided in answer as he began to undress in the room. Lin was annoyed when he saw him take off his top and toss it on the ground.

“Damn you...Stop tossing your clothes everywhere. I just cleaned up the place.”

“Sorry~,” Banba dodged the remark in an upbeat tone. Lin did not think he meant it at all.

“...Huh?”

Immediately afterwards, Banba glanced over to his desk and raised his voice.

“The ball ain’t there.”

He muttered and quickly looked around the room.

“Huh? What is it?”

“Lin-chan,” Banba turned to face him and pointed at his desk. “Do you know what happened to the ball that was over there?”

“A ball? ...Ahh, that one?” Lin recalled tossing the practice ball that was on the desk into the trash can. “If you’re talking about that disgusting ball, I threw it away.”

Banba’s eyes widened.

“Ha!? You threw it away!?”

Lin nodded, dumbfounded. “Y-yeah.”

Banba’s complexion instantly paled, and he rushed over to the trash can and looked inside it. When he saw it was empty, he hastily went to open the window and leaned outside it. He was checking the dump site. However, nothing was there. The garbage truck had already come by and collected the garbage.

“No way...”

Banba held his head, shocked. Lin cocked his head. “What’s wrong?”

What is up with him?

Second Inning

Top of the Second Inning

The young leader of the Noma Group, Kishihara, ran the drug smuggling business that was their main source of income. And as of late, he has had his hands tied dealing with problems. The other day a freelance courier of his had been arrested by the narcotics control department. The five kilograms of stimulants that was meant to be transported to Kitakyushu through the usual route had been confiscated, so the Noma Group had lost important product and their courier at the same time. They had lost roughly 300,000,000 yen at minimum.

But there was a problem that remained: how did the police find out the Noma Group's smuggling route?

There was one possibility Kishihara could think of: someone was leaking information. There was a traitor in their group who had leaked information on the trade to an investigator. It was a grave situation. If they let this go, they would only gain more losses.

"List all the people who have gotten involved in our business in the past few months. Including the dealers we are in contact with; everyone."

Kishihara ordered his men at their base in Haruyoshi, and they nodded firmly in response.

"Um, Kishihara-san." One of them spoke up. "About the Chinese men."

There was another problem giving Kishihara a headache over. There was a Chinese group selling drugs in the Noma Group's territory recently. They had found a Chinese member selling drugs in Nakasu the other day and had ganged up on him, beating him up to remind them who's territory it was and to warn them to back off unless they want repercussions.

"Could those murders have been the Chinese guys' fault?"

The man was referring to the incident earlier this month when two of their men and a drug dealer had been killed.

"According to the police, the bodies were hung upside down. That isn't something a Japanese person would do. That awfully resembles what foreign mafias do."

It was as his subordinate stated. Criminal organizations overseas would mutilate the bodies as an example to intimidate others. Perhaps the murders were done by the Chinese Group. Maybe they had killed their comrades in retaliation for the lynching. His subordinate considered it anyway. And Kishihara could definitely say the possibility was not zero. If the Chinese group had made a come back by killing their men, then they had to take action.

“What should we do, Kishihara-san?”

Kishihara’s men were looking at him.

There was one thing to do. They first needed to confirm it.

“More of you should be on the lookout for them in Nakasu. If any of you spot the Chinese men, capture them and bring them here.”

Kishihara instructed.

Whether the culprit behind the murders was Chinese or not, either way they could not let them get any bigger than they need to be.

“Let’s torture them and make them tell us.”

Kishihara received a report from his subordinates a few hours later. They found a Chinese man selling cocaine at a club in Nakasu and had kidnapped him. He was a young member of the dealing group they were looking for. Kishihara headed to the tenant building which belonged to the Noma Group. There were music studios from the second floor to the fourth floor where band members practiced playing their instruments. One of the rooms of the fourth floor was the Noma Group’s torture room.

The Chinese man was bound to a chair in the center of the room. They could torment him as much as they liked since the room was sound-proof. No one would see what was going on in there, and the man could not scream for someone to call the police.

They were going to torture this Chinese man for information, but Kishihara decided to hire a professional instead of soiling his own hands. He had heard there was someone who specialized in torture in Fukuoka. Kishihara was referred to him by an informant, and he contacted the man for the job.

“You’re Kishihara-san from the Noma Group, right?”

The torturer arrived in the studio at the appointed time. He was a foreigner, yet he was fluent in Japanese. The man was huge and had dark skin and tattoos on his arms. He certainly had the looks of someone from the underground, but he

was sociable.

Ishihara made his request. “I want you to make him tell us if his group were the ones who killed our men and hung them upside or not. And then get as much information as you can out of him on his group.”

“Okay.”

The torturer flipped the switch on the small recorder device and grinned.

“Alright then, let’s get started.” He slowly approached the Chinese man. “Nice to meet you.”

The Chinese man looked up at him and fear clouded over his face.

Bottom of the Second Inning

Alejandro Rodriguez — nickname Alex — was a young yet skilled hitman. He was a dark skinned Dominican with a large body that was nearly two meters tall. He had long, dreaded hair that was artlessly tied back. His eyes that were visible behind his tinted sunglasses were sharp as though they could kill someone just by looking at them. Both his exposed arms from the black tank top he wore were burly as though they could snap someone’s neck with ease. Even the gang members in the drug cartel shook seeing the man’s appearance, as though he had lived to solely kill people.

Drug cartels generally were a network which produced and distributed drugs, and there were many cartels that existed throughout Mexico. Among them, the Veracruz cartel was active within the state of Veracruz, Mexico. Alex was a hitman belonging to that cartel. He was Ramiro Sanchez’s right hand man and was given the name “*Verdugo de Veracruz*” within the gang. They said Alex was cold-blooded; he would twist someone’s neck without mercy when Don Ramiro ordered, “*mátalo*,” regardless if the victim was a woman or child.

Alex was callous but not as the rumors made him out to be.

“...Who would have guessed you were the traitor.”

Alex remarked in a low voice. He had a Cuban cigar pressed between his thick lips.

“You disguised yourself as a *narco* well. I’m impressed, Richard.”

After Alex gave him a smirk, he pressed the burnt side of his cigar against Ricardo’s dark skin.

Ricardo made a voiceless scream at the sheer searing pain. He sensed the sickening smell of flesh burning.

Ricardo had been captured by the organization and was brought to a hotel room they owned somewhere in Veracruz. Alex apathetically tormented Ricardo as he was laid down, bound to the bed he was on as though he was a frog being dissected. He was cut with a knife all over his body, had a cigar pressed against his skin and forced to swallow a truth serum drug, thoroughly weakening him.

“What’s your name?”

Alex questioned him. Ricardo weakly replied, “Richard Louis.”

Almost immediately a fist sunk into his stomach. Ricardo went into a coughing fit from the merciless punch he received.

“I already know that. I’m asking for your real name.”

The letter S was on Alex’s thick arm. All the members in the organization had the same tattoo. It represented the first initial of Sanchez’s name — proof of their loyalty to Don Ramiro.

“If you don’t want to lose any fingers, tell me.”

Although Ricardo was firm to keep his mouth shut in the beginning, he could not withstand Alex’s torture for a long period of time. The drug began to take effect on top of the fear, and his reasoning began to easily crumble away.

“...Ricardo.”

He was going to die anyway. He had no reason to remain quiet. The moment that thought passed his mind, he felt his tongue loosen more.

“Okay. Good boy, Rico.” Alex continued with the interrogation while stroking his beard. “What’s your full name?”

“...Ricardo Seiya Ortega.”

“Seiya? You’re of Japanese descent?”

Ricardo replied in a daze, as though overcome with a fever.

“...My mother is Japanese.”

“Who are your employers? The police? Or the military?”

Ricardo shook his head and whispered, “the DEA.”

It was the abbreviated name for the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration.

When Ricardo revealed his true identity, the door to the hotel room burst open and Ramiro Sanchez came in with his men. The Veracruz drug lord wore a gaudy suit and scoffed when he saw Ricardo’s bloodied skin, “that’s a good look for you, Richard.”

Ricardo grimaced and glared at Ramiro Sanchez wordlessly. He did not have the will to say anything back.

“So, how did it go, Alex? Did you give it up?”

“Yes,” Alex nodded. “He’s one of the DEA people.”

“Really now? A gringo?”

Ricardo was an investigator in the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. He had gone undercover as a courier for the Veracruz Cartel. However, he had been found out. Several henchmen under the derestriction of Don Ramiro approached Ricardo when he got home late in the night and had attacked him. He was beaten up until he lost consciousness, and when he woke up he was in this state. And who awaited him, confined in the hotel room, was none other than the executioner Alex.

“...Speaking of the DEA,” Don Ramiro mentioned as though he just recalled the matter. “Do you know of the incident when the Guadamajara gang kidnapped a DEA investigator?”

Of course he would know. Anyone who had joined the DEA had heard about the incident. A talented DEA agent that was resented by a drug cartel was kidnapped, tortured, sexually assaulted, and then beat to death. It was a horrid event that happened in the 1980s. The agent’s body was discovered a month after his abduction. He was discarded with his limbs bound and only wearing underwear.

“The guy was beaten bloody and got a rod shoved up his rectum. Richard, would you like one shoved up there? This bastard here is a sadistic fag; he’s got a knack for it.”

Ricardo felt frustration build up inside him. At the same time, however, fear seized him, and his body shook.

The dangers that come with the job in the DEA investigation agency when facing ruthless and cruel drug cartels were unfathomable. The chance of death on duty were no different than the FBI. Ricardo was fully aware how dangerous his job was. He was prepared to give up his life in the line of duty if needed. Yet he could not help but cower in fear.

These people were not human. Don Ramiro and Alex were all heartless and inhumane diablos. They would lop off people’s heads and use them as toys. They could easily do cruel deeds no normal person could imagine. And they

were especially merciless towards traitors. Ricardo felt like biting his tongue just by imagining what they would do to him and what torment he would be put through.

“Alright, Alex. Make him tell you if he’s got any other friends undercover. I don’t care what you do with him after that. You can fuck him or kill him; whatever you like. When you kill him, cut off his tongue and head. Drop his torso off in some open patch of land. And then send his head to the DEA’s headquarters.”

Alex nodded with a composed expression at Ramiro’s cruel orders.

“Understood.”

Afterwards, Don Ramiro and his henchmen walked out of the room, leaving Ricardo and Alex. The room fell into silence once more.

“I don’t have any comrades with me...I’m the only one who went undercover.” Ricardo stated, glaring at the executioner. “And even if there were others, I wouldn’t know.”

Alex nodded. “I can believe that.”

“Then just kill me.”

If he was going to be tormented more, he would rather just have a quick death. After a moment’s pause, Alex muttered, “is that so?”

He adjusted the grip on his knife and shifted.

“Then, let’s do it. I don’t have time to spare anyway.”

The springs on the bed loudly crunched underneath him. Alex’s massive body loomed over Ricardo.

“Adios, investigator.”

Alex swung the knife down.

And that was when Ricardo woke up.

He snapped up, trying to regulate his ragged breathing.

Ricardo was not in the Veracruz hotel; he was in his apartment in Fukuoka he took refuge in.

That’s right, he recalled. He had returned home and laid down on the bed for a nap, but at some point he had drifted to slumber instead.

“.....A dream, huh.”

He brushed a hand through his greasy black hair and sighed.

“...The usual bad dream.”

Ricardo quietly whispered.

The events back then were still fresh in his mind: the Mexico city in central America which had violence and crime run amuck, the murders and kidnappings that had become an everyday occurrence, the urban battlefield between the police and opposing organizations, and the atrocious bodies found lying across the landscape of the city. Ricardo deeply sighed, recalling the maelstrom of events back then — during the drug war which had more than 100,000 deaths in. His memories of when he went undercover in the Mexican cartel had turned into nightmares and had kept chipping away at his heart.

Ricardo took off his sweat-sticken T-shirt. His light brown skin had thirty different scars across his body. His fists were still shaking from the lingering fear. His throat was parched. Ricardo got up from the bed and headed into the kitchen, opening the refrigerator for a plastic bottle of water and let the chilled mineral water pour down his throat.

Nine years had passed since that event. Ricardo had been working as a DEA agent to exterminate drug cartels even now. The mid and southern drug cartels have been moving their operations to Asia in recent years. Because of that, the DEA has been sending agents to Asian countries to observe their activities. Since Ricardo's face and name was discovered nine years ago, undercover work in Mexico became more difficult, so he was sent to the east instead. Being half Japanese worked in his favor for his assignment in Fukuoka.

Ricardo was currently undercover as a drug dealer for a drug organization, collecting information from other dealers or people connected with the organizations starting from Yakuin. He had inquired about trade dates, where the drugs were stored at, and smuggling routes and sent that information over to investigators in Fukuoka.

"Apparently there's a weasel among the Noma Group."

The weasel Yakuin was referring to was himself. The truck driver got arrested because Ricardo had leaked the information about him.

"The Noma Group is desperately trying to find the traitor. The moment they do, they'll probably kill them."

Ricardo felt anxiety well up inside him, recalling what Yakuin had told him.

So my identity has been found out? Will I be tormented again when the organization realizes I'm an agent, just like nine years ago? The thought kept pestering Ricardo. He began to shake with his past trauma coming to mind. He

hugged himself to calm down.

“...It'll soon be the tidal hour.”

It would only be a matter of time for the Noma Group to begin suspecting him now that they know of his existence. He could not let them pursue him too far. He should withdraw from this area for his safety. The thought came to his mind when his work cell phone went off. Ricardo pressed the button to accept the call and put the device against his ear. “Yes?”

‘Rico, it’s me.’

“...Gonzales.”

The person on the other line was a fellow member of the DEA in Washington — agent Gonzales. He was Hispanic like Ricardo and also worked in cleaning the Mexico cartels with him in the past.

‘How’s it going? Any new activities?’

“It’s the usual. I purchased 100 grams of stimulants from the Noma Group today.”

Ricardo periodically reported the developments in the case to agent Gonzales like this.

‘I see.’

“However,” Ricardo added. “Seems like the Noma Group is beginning to suspect me. I think I should withdraw soon. I decided to make some distance with them and watch their movements from here on out.”

‘Yeah, you should do that. Don’t overdo anything.’

“I know.”

‘The boss plans to bring you back to headquarters anyway. You must miss America, right?’

“I guess so.”

‘You’ll be going home soon. I’ll volunteer to take your place. I studied abroad in Japan before, so I can understand Japanese more or less.’

Ricardo could not wish for anything else. “That’d be a huge help...are you alright with that?”

‘At this rate I’ll be sent to a remote area in China. They don’t have enough agents stationed in China.’

“It’s a huge country.” Ricardo laughed.

China was a large country that produced drugs. Several organizations were

operating behind the scenes. Because of that, they needed many agents deployed over there.

‘I can’t speak Chinese, and I don’t like Chinese food. I’d rather work in Japan.’

“If that’s what you want, I’ll gladly hand over my position to you.”

After they exchanged a few more words, Ricardo hung up.

Ricardo got into the car and headed to the Noma Group’s hideout to finish the rest of his job. He parked at a coin parking lot near the office and watched the building from inside the vehicle. He was fully aware he had become more passive toward his undercover work ever since the one incident nine years ago. Back then, he would infiltrate deep into the inner workings of organizations more boldly and recklessly, but now he could not bring himself to directly contact someone from the cartel.

There was movement after an hour passed since he began his watch. The young leader Kishihara and several men were getting into a black car.

“They seem to be frantic...did something happen?”

Ricardo paid the parking fare and took off after them. He carefully tailed them, making sure to stay far enough away to not be noticed.

They drove on a national highway for ten minutes before parking in front of a tenant building. The men in black went into the elevator. Ricardo parked on the side of the road as well and followed after them. He watched the display of the elevator, seeing it stop at the fourth floor.

The fourth floor of this building was a music studio.

“...What do they want to do here at a studio?” Ricardo cocked his head and pondered to himself. Perhaps they were storing drugs here.

After a few minutes the elevator began to move again. Kishihara and his men may be coming back. The elevator was coming back to the first floor. Ricardo hid in the emergency staircase and watched from there. The elevator door opened. One man was inside. He was not Kishihara or any of his men. He was a foreigner. He was a large man with a shaved head and a hard-face. He had a tattoo with a simple pattern on his thick, left arm.

Ricardo’s breath caught in his throat when he saw it.

“That tattoo-!”

It was unsettling familiar to him.

“Could that man just now possibly be...?”

The foreigner exited out of the building and began walking towards Hakata. Ricardo decided to give up on Kishihara and his men to follow the other man.



Martinez got a call from his client just as he was finishing up torturing the Chinese man. The tormented man was lying listlessly in the center of the music studio. Ten minutes later, the young leader of the Noma Group — Kishihara — dropped by, accompanied by several of his henchmen. “How did it go? Did he fess up?”

“More or less.” Martinez began to give his report, reading off his notes he took on what the Chinese man confessed to. “First, they had nothing to do with that case where the three guys got murdered during the drug trade.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. He said it wasn’t their doing. They didn’t kill anyone and even if they did they wouldn’t have hung them upside down.”

Martinez continued to give his report.

“Their hideout is a mahjong club in Nakasu. There’s a Chinese restaurant on its first floor. They store their drugs there. Apparently they had a foreigner buying drugs from them recently, but he hasn’t heard who that was.”

“A foreigner, huh...” Kishihara muttered before pressing for more. “Anything else?”

“He went on about grudges against you. ‘Don’t think you’re going to get away with this. We’ll retaliate. My friends are going to come kill you. They’re going to hire a hitman and slaughter all of the members of the Noma Group.’ He said.” Kishihara looked down at the tortured man and smirked, “are you now? Looking forward to it.”

The foreign man shifted his focus from Kishihara to Martinez.

“...*Gaomi-zhe*.”

The man muttered something while glaring at Martinez.

“What was that?”

“*Gaisi...heigui*.”

Unfortunately, Martinez did not understand Chinese. The man probably was not saying anything important, but Martinez recorded what he said just in case.

Once he wrote down what he heard, Kishihara handed over an additional 10,000 yen bill to the 50,000 payment for his work.

“You’re generous.”

“This is cheap compared to paying the cops.”

Martinez did not take it. “While I appreciate it, the 50,000 is enough.”

“You’re a conscientious torturer. I like you. I’ll be using your services again.”

“Until next time then.”

Martinez left the studio and got onto the elevator.

Martinez then got on the subway and headed to Hakata. He got off the train at Hakata station and walked towards the Banba Detective Office. It was on the third floor of a building a few minutes away from the Chikakushi exit at JR Hakata Station. When he got there, the door was unlocked.

“Hey, sorry to intrude.”

Martinez stated as he stepped inside the room. One man was present. He was one of Martinez’s teammates in their grass-lot baseball team and a resident in this office — Xianming Lin.

“...So it’s just you, Mar-san?” Lin was just watching TV. He turned towards him and stood up. “What is it? Do you need something?”

“I need your help with something.”

“From me? That’s rare. Anyway, take a seat.”

Lin pressed him, and he sat down on the receptionist chair. Martinez explained the details just as Lin sat down across from him.

“I actually had a job in which I had to torture a Chinese guy, and he said something in Chinese at the end of the session. I wanted to see what he said. I’d be a huge help if you would translate for me.” He took out his notes on the pronunciation of what the man had said and read it aloud. “Gaoh-mee-jeh, guy-see, hey-gweh...Do you understand it?”

“Yeah,” Lin seemed to comprehend it. “It must be *gaomizhe*, *gaisi*, and *heigui*.”

“What do those mean?”

“*Gaomizhe* means ‘whistleblower.’ *Gaisi* would mean something like, ‘damn you,’ or, ‘die.’ *Heigui* is like ‘nigger’ in English. It’s a discriminatory word.”

In other words, all he said were curses towards me?

“...I should’ve given him a few more punches.”

That damn Chinese guy, Martinez scowled. How dare he curse at me in a

language I couldn't understand.

"Thanks, Lin. You're a great help. I'll treat you for a meal as thanks." Martinez suddenly realized. "Actually, where's Marlow? Is he out?"

"Marlow?" Lin cocked his head, confused.

"Philip Marlowe. He's a private detective. At least read Chandler's works."

Martinez revised his question while giving a wry smile, "where's Banba?" Lin's expression changed.

He grimaced, sullen.

"...Hell if I know."

He spat out with a harsh tone.

"Hey, did something happen?"

"Not really."

Lin was not making a face as though nothing happened. He was easy to see through. He must have had a fight with Banba.

"I'll treat you for some ramen, so cheer up."

Martinez took Lin and headed to Nakasu to do so, as well as repay him for translating Chinese for him.



The room had been a mess. And so he cleaned. That was all he did. It was not just for today; it was something he habitually did. He had done that multiple times up until now.

Regardless, for some reason Banba was furious.

"How dare you do that!"

His shout boomed through the office.

"Wha-?" Lin cocked his head, uncomprehending. "What's up with you all the sudden? What the hell are you pissed at me for?"

I just cleaned. What's up with him?

Lin was dumbfounded, and Banba yelled at him even more, "you just did whatever you wanted without askin'!"

"Hey, hold on a sec," Lin could not remain silent at that. He frowned and refuted. "What did I do? I just cleaned the room--"

"You threw away someone else's things! You idiot!"

Banba's yelling was relentless. He was shouting to the point he was spitting out saliva.

"Does it really matter if I threw away that dirty ball!?" Lin yelled back, unrelenting.

"No, it ain't! That ball is-"

Banba abruptly stopped.

The room fell into silence.

"...What's up with that ball?" Lin turned back to face him and glared. "Tell me."

Banba was dead silent. He did not answer his question. He just muttered, 'just forget it,' displeased, before turning his back towards Lin. He left the office, fuming, slammed the door shut and stomped away.

That happened last evening.

"What did he mean by 'just forget it!?'"

Lin exclaimed and slammed down his glass.

Lin and Martinez had gone to the food stall Gen-chan in Nakasu and explained what happened the night before while having Fukuoka's specialty tonkotsu ramen. "Come on. Calm down," Martinez tried to soothe him. The owner of the restaurant Genzo chided, "you don't hafta be so mad 'bout it."

Enokida was at the food stall as well. He had tilted his head while listening to Lin's story. "It's rare for Banba-san to be that mad."

"Are you sure about that? Isn't he always mad about something? He was pissy during the last match too. He always nags me every time I make an error."

"I guess that's true."

Banba was usually calm and gentle, but he would switch on the drop of a dime. He surprisingly had an explosive personality, especially when it came to baseball. He would continuously yell just for someone making a mistake in a game. Recalling how many times that had happened, Lin felt frustration build up inside him again. "He doesn't chew out everyone else; he always gets mad at me solely...He pisses me off."

"But look, you're like his ki-, I mean, like a brother to him."

"...You almost said 'kid' just now, didn't you?" Lin glared at Enokida. *Who's the kid here? Banba is more of the brat.* He internally cursed.

Martinez laughed. "Hey, don't worry about it. This is Banba we're talking about. He'll forget what he's mad about and will come home as frivolous as ever."

“And him behaving like that is another thing that pisses me off.”

Lin snorted.

“Hey, old man.” He turned to Genzo. “If you get any job requests, send them my way instead of him.”

I’m going to take all of Banba’s jobs. That bastard can become unemployed for all I care.

“Alright, I gotcha.” Genzo replied, exasperated.

After a few minutes, Martinez finished his ramen and stood up. “Well, I’ll be going now.”

“Ah, me too.” Enokida chimed in.

“Gen-san, I’m paying for Lin as well with this.” Martinez took out a million yen bill.

“Ah, mine too.”

“...Pay for your own food.”

Martinez ended up paying for the three of them, while glaring at Enokida for taking advantage of him.

“Thank you, Mar-san.”

Enokida gave his thanks to the large man’s generosity. Martinez smiled at Lin and pat his head, “don’t drink too much.”

After the two had left, Lin ordered Genzo. “Old man, give me another beer.”

“Have some water.”

“No thanks. I need to drink today.”

Lin demanded for more booze, sounding like an old man.

Genzo reluctantly refilled his drink. Lin began to mutter complaints again. “... Hey, don’t you think it’s strange? I just cleaned up. Isn’t the normal response, ‘thank you?’ So why did he call me an idiot? He wasn’t grateful; he just shouted at me...Ahh, damn. Just remembering it makes me mad.”

“How come Banba was that mad?”

“Hell if I know.”

Lin just got yelled at one sidedly without understanding the circumstances. Lin downed his beer, irritated.

“...Hey, Lin,” Genzo asked out of curiosity. “What kind of ball was it?”

“It was just some dirty ball. Here, this is it.”

Lin took out a hard ball from his pocket.

Genzo's eyes widened. "You didn't throw it away?"

"I meant to."

Lin had thrown it towards the trash can, but he had missed and the ball did not go inside it. It rolled onto the floor and got stuck under the bed.

Lin thought he had thrown it away but actually did not. He only realized it after Banba stormed out of the office in fury. But he did not feel like going out of his way to return it.

"You should hurry up an' give that back. It's important to him." Genzo was astounded.

"If it was that important to him, he should have just told me. But he didn't..."

Banba was about to say something in that moment. But he abruptly stopped and chose to not tell him. And that fact spurred on Lin's irritation even more.

"Banba's always been the kind of fella to not talk much 'bout himself."

"Ha," Lin snorted. "You mean he's secretive?"

Lin did not know what he was hiding, but he thought it would be better for him to rethink his conceited ways so he could be trusted.

"That ain't it." Genzo sighed. "...He's got a lot of things on his plate. And he remains silent 'bout them lots of things so you don't get wind up in them."

"What do you mean?" Lin questioned sullenly. "What lots of things?"

"Ask the person himself," Genzo handed back the ball. "Take this to him and apologize."

"Ha? Why do I have to apologize to him?"

"You gotta be an adult, Lin."

"I am an adult. He's the one acting like a kid."

"A man also needs the skills to forgive someone." Genzo winked.

Lin pouted with a stern expression adorning his face when the elder kindly admonished him. "...I won't forgive him until he's apologizing to me on his hands and knees. And I won't give him his ball back either until then."

Genzo sighed. *This is useless.*

"...I gotta wonder where he's wanderin' 'round right now."

Genzo's thoughts turned to Banba. "Hell if I care," Lin countered back.



The 10thousand was an old nightclub in Nakasu that has been around for fifteen years now. Booming music echoed throughout the club, and young people were dancing on the floor, flooding the DJ.

Banba was gulping down a Zima bottle at the corner of the counter at the bar. It had been a while since he had last come to this club. He used to come here often in his early twenties and frequently drank until sunrise, but he had since receded from visiting completely.

The kind of guests at the club had drastically changed while he had been away. He saw an abundance of foreigners present, from Asians to black people. There were even shady-looking characters in the VIP room. There were drug dealers selling white powder to young people in the men's room.

This club was not this dangerous back then. "There's no decency left in the world," Banba whispered to himself, tilting his Zima bottle to the side.

"Hey," Banba was called out by a woman just as a Latino-based song began to play.

"Would you mind buying me a drink?"

That reminded him; he used to get called out to by women like this a lot back in his younger days. "Looks like I still got it goin'." He chuckled internally.

Who is it? Banba looked over to the woman who spoke to him and widened his eyes, raising his voice, "ah."

She was a woman he was well acquainted with.

"Sayuri-san!"

She had a tall figure, short hair, and elegant features that made her look out of place in this club. Like Banba, she was a fellow assassin. And she was also his ex-lover.

"Whatcha doin' here?"

She must have returned from overseas.

"Work. I had met with a client." Sayuri pointed in the direction of the VIP room.

"Likewise, it's a rare sight to see you here."

"I wanted to drop by after so long."

Sayuri ordered the same drink as him. They made a toast with her newly opened Zima before continuing on with their conversation.

"...Hey, Sayuri-san. I got a favor to ask ya."

"What is it?"

“Can I stay at your place for today?”

Banba clasped his hands together in front of his face, pleading, but Sayuri turned him down. “No.”

“Ehhh, why not...”

“Stop playing around and go back to your own house. You’re a grown man.”

Banba made a wry smile at her harsh words. “...It’s just, a bit difficult to go home right ‘bout now.”

“Oh really?” Sayuri slightly smiled and peered at his face. “Did you have a fight with that boy or something?”

Banba instantly fell silent when she easily guessed the correct answer.

“And you have no place to go, so you’re wasting your time here and having some drinks.”

“...Sayuri-san, you sure do see through everythin’.”

She was a sharp as always. Banba shrugged.

“So what caused the fight?” Banba explained everything from beginning to end when she asked.

Sayuri sighed, astonished, and told him, “go and apologize to him.”

“No,” Banba shook his head. “I’m not budgin’ on this.”

A precious and memorable item had been thrown away. He would not give in that easily.

“You kyushu boys and your stubbornness.”

“Men are people who treasure their memories.”

“You’ll lose what is most important to you when you obsess over memories indefinitely.”

Her words always struck a chord. “Yeah, maybe.” Banba muttered.

“Ah, that reminds me.”

Sayuri gulped down the rest of her Zima and told him.

“Since you seem to be on break right now, will you do a job for me?”



Enokida walked around Nakasu at night with Martinez after they had left Genzo’s food stall. They passed by a building with a club called 10thousand in it and proceeded down a narrow alleyway with little passerby.

Enokida asked Martinez as they walked. “How did the job with the Noma Group go?”

Enokida had recommended Martinez to Kishihara who had been looking for a professional torturer.

“Yeah, it was easy.”

“Tell me the details.” Enokida pressed him. Martinez was one of his important sources for information as a torturer.

Martinez began. “Apparently two men from the Noma Group and a freelance drug dealer got murdered recently. Kishihara suspected a Chinese group was behind it, but they were actually innocent.”

“...I may know who the culprit is.”

“Seriously?” Martinez exclaimed.

“Yeah. The culprit is definitely not Chinese.”

“Then who is it?”

“A killer clown.”

“Wha-?”

Martinez was about to ask him to explain when a stern voice ordered from behind them, “don’t move.”

Enokida and Martinez instantly came to a halt. Tension coarsed through their whole body. They snapped around to see a man standing before them. He had a gun in hand and was pointing it at Martinez.

“Raise both of your hands.”

The man ordered.

Enokida did as the stranger asked. Martinez slowly raised his hands next to him similarly, palms facing outward.

Enokida observed the man, blinking in the dim lighting. The man was around his thirties. He wore a black leather racing jacket, khaki work pants and boots. He could not tell what type of person he was based off his clothing.

He was slimmer than Martinez, but he also had a muscular build and his inner gray T-shirt looked partially tight. He had a well arranged face and his facial features were prominent. He had black, short undercut hair. He was somewhat tan and clearly had a mix of foreign blood in him, but he looked Asian as well as hispanic. Enokida could see he was accustomed to fighting based off his physique and stance. The handgun he held was automatic.

“You’re-”

Martinez’s eyes widened when he saw the man’s face and raised his voice in shock.

“Do you know him, Mar-san?”

“...Yeah, more or less.” Martinez nodded with a wry smile. “He and I have some history. Looks like he couldn’t forget about me and chased me down. How admirable.”

Martinez was gay. It was not strange for him to have had male partners in the past, but it was unsettling for an ex-lover of his to point a gun his way. *What sort of horrible break up did they have? Is this guy really one of Martinez’s lovers?* Enokida had multiple questions.

“Enokida, go ahead without me.” Martinez instructed. “I want to talk alone with him.”

He then turned his gaze to the man.

“This guy has nothing to do with us. Let him go. You got that?”

Martinez was trying to let Enokida escape. The man agreed and signaled with his chin, “go.” The whole time he stared at Martinez and kept his gun facing him. He looked bloodthirsty, as though he was ready to pull the trigger at any moment.

“Hey, will you be alright?”

Martinez nodded with a smile when Enokida asked. “Yeah, don’t worry.”

“Be careful.”

Enokida pat Martinez’s back and left.

Enokida put his earphones in as he walked down the street to the internet cafe he was staying at.

‘Who do you have history with now?’

Enokida heard the man’s displeased voice. The connection was good.

Enokida had planted a listening device in his pocket when he pat Martinez’s back — a redback spider listening device and transmitter. Enokida was able to listen to their conversation and track Martinez’s current location.

Enokida carelessly listened to the men talk from what he could hear through his earphones.

‘I couldn’t put it any other way.’

That was Martinez’s voice that time.

“That man is an informant. He’s brimming with curiosity. If I’m perfectly honest, he’d try to poke his head into this.”

“You know me so well,” Enokida smirked.



This isn’t good, Martinez tutted.

The man slowly approached him, the footsteps from his work boots clicking against the ground, gun still facing him. He pressed the barrel of the gun against Martinez’s heart and asked in a low voice.

“Who do you have some history with now?”

Martinez smiled, both hands still raised. “Did you forget what we did in that Veracruz hotel? I treated you so nicely on top of that bed.”

“Cutting me in thirty places and burning me with a Cuban cigar is how you show affection?”

“Your tear-stained face back then was the best.”

The moment he smirked at him a sharp pain burst up in his stomach. The man had sunk his knee into his stomach, and Martinez groaned. “That hurt, dammit.” Martinez glared at the man’s face as he hugged himself. He had almost thrown up the ramen he just ate.

The other glared back. “You’re sick. I wasn’t your anything; you’re repulsive.”

The man took offense to his earlier statement. This time he pressed the gun to Martinez’s forehead.

Martinez was really not in a good situation. He made an excuse, hoping he would lighten up. “I couldn’t put it any other way. That man is an informant. He’s brimming with curiosity. If I’m perfectly honest, he’d try to poke his head into this. ...Would you have preferred that?”

The other man fell silent.

“It wouldn’t turn out well for you if he got involved, right? Richard. ...Ah, that’s right; your real name was Ricardo, correct?”

Ricardo corrected him with a grim expression when Martinez used his past name. “I’m Murakami now.”

He must be undercover in some organization again if he was using another fake name. “Looks like you’re still doing nothing but undercover work. No matter

how many lives you have, you'll run out eventually."

"That's my line, Alex."

"I'm José Martinez now." Martinez corrected him as well. He then added with a light smile. "You can call me Pepe."

Pepe was a common pet name for José. "As if anyone would call you that," Ricardo spat.

"Nonetheless, it's been a while, Rico. It's been what, nine years?" Martinez chatted with him in a cheerful tone. "I didn't know who you were at first. You looked like Che Guevara back then, but now you've got a nice trim."

Ricardo had a beard at the time and had long, permed hair. He had purposefully dressed more uncouth to pose as a drug cartel dealer.

"You've sure changed your look too. I wouldn't have recognized you if it wasn't for that tattoo on your arm." Ricardo snorted, glancing over to that spot. "You had straight hair back then. Sorry you got premature baldness."

"This is shaved. You're rude."



Martinez had also changed drastically. He had shaved off his hair and beard, completely changing his outlook so his old comrades could not find him and he could start a new life.

However, one of the people who knew him — Ricardo — stood before him now. He was unsure what to do.

"So? What do you want from me?" He had a guess, but he asked him anyway, barefaced.

"I have a lot of things I want to ask you about." Ricardo answered him, glaring. I'm not surprised, Martinez thought to himself and nodded. "I see. This could

take a while, so let's change locations."

"...Yeah, let's do that."

Ricardo agreed keenly. Martinez anticipated to settle this dispute with him peacefully, but he had been naive. He felt a blow to his head — Ricardo had struck Martinez.

Groaning, Martinez collapsed on the spot. His head throbbed. He must have been hit against the temple with the gun. Martinez grit his teeth, trying to grasp onto consciousness, but he could not help but fade away.

Translation Notes:

Guadamajara is not a real place but Guadalajara is. Kisaki seems to be eluding to a real famous case but has changed some of the details on purpose. The real case took place in 1985, when a DEA undercover agent Kiki Camarena was kidnapped by a drug cartel and then brutally murdered.

Third Inning

Top of the Third Inning

“...Ahh, my head.”

No matter how much of a hangover he suffered from, he had to work. After all, he was a professional. Lin headed to Nakasu on foot while bracing his throbbing head.

He had demanded Genzo to give him work. His client was a Chinese criminal group. The members consisted of Chinese and second and third generation men. They were gaining profits by smuggling drugs from traditional opium drugs to new kinds of drugs developed by underground organizations. Lin was not looking forward to this job, but he preferred doing it instead of having nothing to do at the office.

There was an old tenant building on a poorly lit street at a corner in Nakasu. A Chinese restaurant was on the first floor, but Lin was summoned to the mahjong club on the next floor. The group members were situated around the center mahjong board. They all looked rough with some puffing smoke and others gulping down canned beers. They looked like any other group who liked to play mahjong, but the mahjong club was shut down for the day, and there were no other guests inside.

One of the men with slit eyes addressed Lin when he saw him come in. “You’re Xianming Lin?”

“Yeah,” Lin nodded. “I am.”

“I heard you’re a skilled hitman.”

The man spoke with a bit of a Chinese accent. “More or less,” Lin replied.

“Sit.”

Lin was prompted to it in an open chair, but he sat down on the mahjong table instead.

“...Ahh, my head hurts.” Lin asked while pressing a hand against his forehead with a grimace. “Hey, do you have any drugs?”

“Drugs?” The Chinese men all cocked their heads. “You mean heroine? Or do you prefer cocaine?”

“No, not that type of drug. Something to alleviate pain.”

“Morphine?”

“No, I want just painkillers for headaches.”

“I’ll give you this.”

One of the Chinese men handed him a container that was only two centimeters wide. A clear, see-through liquid was inside.

“This is a new morphine based drug an organization called Shou Wang developed for soldiers to use on the battlefield. Its immediate effects are better than standard ones. If you drink this, the pain will vanish.”

Lin could not settle to use morphine to get rid of his hangover. “...Thanks.”

Lin took the drug but put it in his pocket. He at least came to know the range of drugs the group dealt.

“So, who should I kill?”

Lin got to the main topic, his head still aching.

“The Noma Group.”

One man answered him.

“The Noma Group?”

“They’re a Japanese mafia in Fukuoka.”

The moment the Noma Group was mentioned, everyone’s complexion changed.

“They hurt our friend!” “We can’t forgive them for this!” “They’re dead!”

They screeched.

“...Don’t yell so loud; it’s making my head pound.”

Lin muttered, hand pressed against his brow.

“So it’s fine if I kill all of the Noma guys then?”

“No,” the man shook his head. “One of our comrades — Zhou — was kidnapped by them. We want him back.”

He turned to face one of his friends and stated, “this guy will show you the way there.”

According to them, the man Zhou had been confined in a music studio on Oyafukou Street. One of the men who was with Zhou found their hideout by tailing the Noma Group’s men.

Lin got in the car with his Chinese escort, and they headed over there.

“There it is.”

After they drove down a narrow alley off of Oyafukou street, his guide spoke up as he parked the car on the side of the road.

“Zhou was taken to the fourth floor of that building.”

“The fourth floor? Got it.”

Lin got out of the passenger’s seat. He had instructed the man to stay behind, but the other had insisted in tagging along. He must be worried for his comrade. Lin warned him they could encounter the Noma Group here but otherwise let him do as he pleased.

They took the emergency stairs to get to the fourth floor, and when they got there they examined the floor from the door. They could see the door to the studio just down the hallway.

“...Someone’s here.”

After a few minutes, the door opened and two men came out from inside. They were probably henchmen from the Noma Group. They locked the door and were about to leave. “Stay hidden until I give you a signal.” Lin ordered the guide and stepped out into the hallway.

They were just two people, regardless if they were yakuza or not. Lin decided to face them head on.

“This is odd...I thought it was this building...”

Lin approached the two men while pretending to be a lost woman.

The men watched Lin, weary for a moment.

“Ah, I’m sorry. Do you have a moment?”

When Lin called out to them with a smile, they must have believed he was an average person as the two let their guard down. “I’m looking for this place.” Lin took out his smartphone, and they leaned over to look at the screen.

Lin grabbed the back of one of their heads and kneed him.

The man grasped his head and collapsed to his knees. Lin mercilessly kicked him in the face as he writhed in pain. The man’s head struck against the wall before he slumped to the ground.

One man down. There was one more to go.

Lin turned to face the other gang member. He swiftly dived at the man while he was still taken off guard and sunk his fist into his solar plexus. The man groaned and collapsed, folding over his comrade’s body.

“And the key is...ah, here it is.”

Lin fished through their pockets while they were unconscious and took the key to the room.

He signaled the guide down to come over.

They opened the door and entered inside the room. A man was lying on the ground in the center of the silent studio.

“Zhou!” The guide’s eyes widened when he saw him. He shouted and quickly rushed over to the man’s side. “Zhou! Get a hold of yourself! Zhou!”

“...It’s pointless.” Lin reached for the man’s wrist, checking his pulse, and muttered. “He’s dead.”

The body was still warm. He must have just been killed. They were a moment too slow.

The corpse was in a horrific state. He seemed to have been thoroughly beaten. His face was greatly swelled up, and he had bruises all over his body.

Lin suddenly recalled. *That’s right, didn’t Martinez say he had a job where he tortured a Chinese man? There’s no way,* he shook his head. Martinez could not have been correlated with this.

There was a sheet of paper laid out on Zhao’s stomach, pinned by a knife. The paper read: ‘go back to your country, you fucking Chinks.’

It was a provoking note. The Noma Group must have expected the other members of their group would come here.

“Hey,” Lin sternly ordered the other man who was lying over his dead friend’s body, grieving. “We can’t stay here long. We need to hurry.”



“Kishihara-san.”

A man beside Kishihara addressed him as he was about to drink his liquor at the high quality club he frequented. Kishihara scowled, as his time playing with the beautiful hostesses got interrupted. He replied, reclining back in his seat. “What is it?”

His subordinate whispered in his ear. “It’s about the Chinese man’s body we left in the studio.”

“...Don’t talk about anything that’ll ruin the taste of the alcohol.”

“The body is gone.” The subordinate continued on, regardless of his warning. “It seems his comrades had come to retrieve him.”

It went exactly as they planned. “So they did come? They were faster than I

expected.”

“Two of our men were injured when they did. Fortunately, it was not life threatening.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“It’s not. I believe the attack was done by a professional based off of how efficient it was done. Should we take any measures against this?”

The torture had relayed to them that the Chinese man Zhou swore his friends would seek retribution. That they would hire a hitman and kill the entirety of the Noma Group. They were close with their comrades. The Chinese group must be furious after seeing what horrible atrocities they did to Zhou’s corpse. Kishihara could vividly see they would go in a frenzy and hire a hitman and devise a counter attack against them.

“There’s no need for concern. I already made measures ahead of time.”

Kishihara smirked. “We hired our own hitman.”



Afterwards, Lin carried the body to the car with the help of the sobbing man and returned to the Chinese men’s hideout. He carried Zhou, wrapped up in a vinyl sheet, to the Mahjong club and laid him on top of the Mahjong table. The other Chinese members surrounded the body. They all were silent when they returned. They were simultaneously dejected and immensely enraged.

“Kishihara had his henchmen kill him.”

“We can’t let the Noma Group bastards get away with this.”

“Let’s kill Kishihara.”

“We’ll kidnap Kishihara this time.”

“Yeah, that sounds good.”

“Let’s do it.”

Lin remained silent and watched them from the corner of the Mahjong club. It seemed they collectively decided to get revenge.

“We’re going to abduct Kishihara. Help us.”

The man with the qualities of a leader ordered Lin.

“Sure, I don’t care. As long as you pay me for it.” Lin consented. He then asked them. “So, how are you going to capture this Kishihara guy?”

“We’ll snatch him when he’s moving about with a van.” One replied.

“We have to watch his home.” Another man piped in. “That would be the easiest way to do it.”

“So where’s Kishihara’s place?”

All the Chinese men fell silent at Lin’s question. No one seemed to know where their enemy lived. *So how do you plan to attack Kishihara? Are you guys all talk?* Lin sighed. They were troublesome clients.

“I’ll look into it, so you better pay me extra for it.” Lin called an informant he was well acquainted with after telling the group that. “...Ah, hello? Enokida?”

‘Hey,’ Enokida replied and asked. ‘Did you make up with Banba-san?’

Now that he had mentioned it, I completely forgot about him.

However, that did not matter at the present moment. Lin snapped back. “Now’s not the time for that. I have a job for you. I need you to find where the Noma Group’s Kishihara lives at. Immediately.”

Bottom of the Third Inning

Alejandro Rodriguez was around sixteen years old when he first met Ramiro Sanchez — the boss of the Veracruz cartel.

The boy Alejandro had many brothers and grew up in a poor family. He passed the entrance exams to get into a major academy in the capital of the Dominican Republic, Santo Domingo, and spent his days immersed in baseball as a hatchling for the major league. Alejandro’s dream was to become an MLB player to support his family, much like half of the boys into baseball in the Dominican Republic had.

However, Alejandro’s dream was immediately crushed. He had met numerous monsters in the academy. They had so much talent beyond his own that it was not even comparable. He felt no matter how much he tried, he was no match against them. He could not compete against them. An ordinary person like him would not be called out to any major league group. He would struggle just to get into 3A.

Alejandro, having reality shoved in his face, had dropped out of the academy. And he continued to fall further in a matter of time. In less than half a year, he had been reduced to a mere thug in a gang, hanging around in the back streets of Santo Domingo. The arms he had trained to swing a bat were used for violence against people, and the legs he had trained to swiftly run to bases

were used to shake the police off his trail. The money he sent to his poor family was money he stole from tourists on the streets.

He spent his days in desolation when one day one of his friends in the same gang as him told him a breakthrough in how he could make the big bucks. The boss of a Mexican drug cartel was visiting Santo Domingo for a business deal and was enlisting new recruits for his organization. Alejandro let that information digest. Mexican drug cartels made easy money in dollars with Uncle Sam as their patron. If he got into the cartel, he could possibly live better than he had been up until now. That was what he thought.

The location was at an abandoned warehouse in a bad part of Santo Domingo. When Alejandro arrived there were other young people from gangs like himself, bringing the number of people present more than ten. Only good-for-nothings applied for the job, hoping to get into the drug business.

After a couple of minutes, Don Ramiro Sanchez came in, accompanied by several of his subordinates. He had a short build yet he carried the presence befitting someone as a boss of a drug cartel. He wore a white suit with a tawdry patterned undershirt and a white ten-gallon hat on top of his head. He wore a gold wrist watch on his right hand and a matching golden necklace around his neck that shone lasciviously. His eyes were covered behind dark sunglasses and had a magnificent beard with a cigar hanging from his mouth, creating the perfect image of head of a drug dealer.

"We're shorthanded, so we're always looking for capable people to work for us. I would like to have all of you work with me."

The gangsters' eyes lit up at Don Ramiro's words.

"However, before you can join," he added. "I believe a test to determine your worth is in order."

Don Ramiro then sent a signal to his men to hand out AK-47, which were assault rifles called *cuerno de chibo*. The lackeys followed his orders, and one of the men with a S shaped tattoo on his arm brought in a man. The man was in shabby shape like a prisoner of war. His right eye was swelled up, he had a cracked front tooth, and his face was covered in blood as though he received multiple beatings.

Ramiro glanced over to the man and stated. "This guy is a traitor of our organization. He was a snitch who sold our comrades out to the police."

He then ordered them.

“You guys take turns to beat him up. You can hit him anywhere, including his head and his torso. You can hit him as many times as you like. Just don’t hold back.”

Ramiro’s test was to hurt this man.

The test began immediately. And as instructed, everyone got in a line and took turns beating up the man. Ramiro watched, enjoying the scene.

The man was already in horrible shape. His breathing was feeble as well.

Alejandro could not watch his suffering any longer.

“You’re up.”

Alejandro’s turn had come around.

He met the man’s gaze. He was pleading with those eyes, begging for them to stop and to spare him.

If this man continued to be pummeled, he could die. And even if he fortunately survived, only more cruel torture at the hands of the drug cartel members awaited him.

Alejandro pitied him. He felt empathetic towards this tormented man.

Alejandro went to put him out of his misery. He approached one of Ramiro’s subordinates nearby and took the man’s handgun that was strapped onto his waist.

I’ll release you from this hell.

Alejandro pulled the trigger, shooting the man right between the eyes.

There was a gunshot, and for a moment the area grew tense.

The man was instantly killed. He died without pain.

That was the first time Alejandro had killed someone. However, he strangely did not feel any guilt. Rather, he felt he did what was right. He had saved the man’s soul. God would surely forgive him.

Yet that could not be said for the drug cartel. Ramiro’s henchmen surrounded Alejandro, all of them holding their rifles up to him. Several AK-47s were pointed at him. The men were waiting for Ramiro’s order to pull their triggers.

“...I believe I said, *golpéalo*. Not *mátalo*.”

Don Ramiro noted. He questioned Alejandro in a small voice.

“Why did you shoot him?”

Alejandro had disobeyed Don’s order. If he did not make a good enough excuse,

he would be pelted with rifle bullets and left with holes all over his body. He would be executed in an instant.

However, if he used this opportunity to his advantage, he could possibly gain Ramiro's favor.

This was a bet.

"I wanted to test my shooting arm."

Alejandro smirked. Internally he felt like peeing himself he was so afraid, but he kept up his bluff in front of the Veracruz drug lord.

"So, *señor* Sanchez. How long are we going to keep playing around?"

Don Ramiro frowned. "...What did you say?"

"Is your cartel looking for kids who are good at boxing?" Alejandro questioned back. "You can't be, right?"

What you guys are looking for are cold and capable people who could carry out any order whether that be murder or something else without hesitation. Isn't that right? Don Ramiro. Alejandro gazed at Ramiro head on, trying to appeal to him.

Don Ramiro stared at Alejandro as though evaluating his worth. Those few seconds of silence felt awfully long.

Fortunately, the Veracruz drug lord was reasonable. He smirked and nodded.

"...Yeah, you're exactly right."

Don Ramiro's laughter resounded through the midst of the tense atmosphere.

"You're an interesting brat. I like you!"

After he laughed for a while, he crouched down next to the body Alejandro had shot and examined its face. He looked at the bullet wound between the man's brow, pleased. "Your aim was on point too. You don't have a bad shooting arm, and you've got guts. I feel like you'll be of great use."

Ramiro then turned back to face him.

"What's your name?"

Alejandro gave his name. "Alejandro Rodriguez."

"Come with me, Alex. As of today, you're my *familia*."

Ramiro turned on his heel as he lit a new cigar.

And that was how Alejandro — Alex — had become Ramiro Sanchez's subordinate. Ever since that day he had killed many people as Ramiro's right hand man and ascended to become a terrifying being as Veracruz's executioner.

However—



He felt like he had a long dream.

Martinez woke up, wrenching his heavy eyelids open.

“You awake?”

He heard a voice nearby.

He spotted Ricardo sitting on a pipe chair in his blurry vision.

“...Where am I?” Martinez asked, unable to focus on anything.

He seemed to be in an apartment somewhere, but there was no other objects besides the chair. It was a tasteless room.

“This is one of the DEA’s hideouts.” Ricardo answered him curtly. “How are you feeling?”

“...Awful.”

His head was throbbing. He had been knocked unconscious and was asleep for a couple of hours.

“Ahh, shit, I’m dizzy. Why’d you randomly hit me? Don’t go for the head.

There’s nothing to protect it, so it hurts.”

“Because you got premature baldness.”

“I told you this is shaved.” Martinez grimaced from both his sharp headache and the rude comment.

“You’re looking pretty good there, Alex.”

“Don’t call me that.”

He had expected his past bill to come around eventually, but it had arrived sooner than he anticipated. Martinez was prepared for the worst situation he currently found himself in the moment he reunited with Ricardo after nine years.

Will I be arrested or executed?

He was being left alive for now. However, he was unable to move freely. He was in a chair with his hands cuffed behind him. Both his legs were also tied to the chair.

“Hey, is this all really necessary?”

“It wouldn’t be good if you escaped.”

“I won’t run or hide.” Martinez snorted. “Get rid of these.”

“No.”

Ricardo objected and rose to his feet. He slowly sauntered over to him.

“I have a lot of questions for you.” He stood in front of Martinez and ordered.

“Answer honestly.”

“Fine. You can ask me anything. Like my measurements.”

“Cut it with the pointless chatter. Or I’ll put a hole in your tongue.” Ricardo put a hand over his gun for show and began his interrogation. “What are you doing now for work?”

“I’m a chiropractor. I’m doing honest work now.”

“Don’t lie to me,” Ricardo spat. “And why would a respectable person meet up with the Noma Group?”

“I didn’t.”

“You met them at the studio in Oyafukou.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The moment he cocked his head to the side, Ricardo’s fist swung at him. It hit him on the right side of his face, making the chair almost tip over. Martinez managed to stop from falling over with one foot and shouted. “That hurt! What was that for!?”

“You should be happy I only punched you, you damn homo.”

There was a cut in the inside of his mouth. There was a metallic tang. After he spat blood onto the floor, Martinez replied. “...Okay. I’ll answer honestly.”

“You should’ve done that from the beginning, you idiot.” Ricardo cursed. He was foulmouthed as ever.

“Presently, I take on torture work.”

“Torture?” Ricardo snorted when Martinez told him that. “That’s the perfect job for a sadistic shit like you.”

“I’m not really a sadist.” Martinez shrugged. “Any standard sadist isn’t fit as a professional torturer. It’s a refined craft and delicate occupation. It’s a job kind hearted gentlemen do.”

“I don’t have the time to hear your lecture on torture. Continue on from what you were saying before. Kishihara from the Noma Group hired you for something, right?”

“...Yeah, he did.” Martinez knew what would happen if he lied. He felt bad for

his client, but he decided to be frank with him. “He asked me to torture a man and get information out of him.”

“Who was the man?”

Martinez stated. “A Chinese guy from a drug dealing group.”

Notes:

Most of Martinez’s past revealed in this chapter is all you need to know to read the gaiden chapter from the Extra Games novel: Helper ([click here to read](#)). If you want to be extra safe that you read all of his backstory in the cartel before reading, wait until after the fourth inning, but it’s not really necessary. The gaiden specifically follows how Martinez began torture work and what happened after he left the cartel.

Fourth Inning

Top of the Fourth Inning

“Listen up you guys.” Lin questioned the Chinese men to reaffirm once more. “You got the plan memorized?”

The four men present nodded simultaneously.

Including Lin, all together they were a group of five and wore pitch black leather suits to blend into the darkness. They were going to carry out the kidnapping of Kishihara, the young leader of the Noma Group.

The plan went as followed. They knew Kishihara’s home was in Akasaka thanks to Enokida’s research. And Kishihara would work out at a sports gym on a daily basis late into the night. They decided to wait for the moment Kishihara left the twenty-four hour gym.

They brought two motorcycles and an eight-passenger van. Four of them, including Lin, would ride the motorcycles and the last person would drive the van.

First, one of the motorcycles would pull out in front of the vehicle Kishihara would be in to slow them down. If they could shoot the driver dead, that would be even better. The other motorcycle would approach the vehicle in the darkness. Lin would ride on the backseat. They would block the vehicle’s path of escape from behind if they try to reverse. They would use a crowbar to break the windows and pull out guns on Kishihara and his men to threaten them to comply. Lin would get off the motorcycle and cut the tires so they could not move. It was also Lin’s job to finish the men accompanying Kishihara.

The van would be waiting nearby. They would all quickly flee the scene once they capture Kishihara and put him in the van. And then the plan would be finished.

At two am there was a black, high-class car parked in front of Kishihara’s home. The windows were tinted, so it was impossible to see anything inside. From the size of the vehicle, it looks like it could allow no more than five passengers. A few minutes later, Kishihara appeared wearing a sports outfit and got into the backseat.

“Commence the battle plan. Let’s go.”

Lin ordered, putting a full-face helmet on his head as the car took off.

The members took action at Lin's signal. The second motorcycle pursued after the car Kishihara was in. The first motorcycle passed by the car in a narrow alleyway and stopped to block their path. The car horn blared a few times. The man on the motorcycle took out a gun and fired into the windshield, stopping the driver. Kishihara's lackeys rushed out of the car hastily, and before they could counter attack they got shot, causing them to bend over and hold their stomachs.

The motorcycle Lin was on parked instantly behind the car. Once Lin got off the motorcycle, he swiftly cut the tires using a knife with impossible speed.

Everything so far was going according to plan. But then, in the next second—"Uwaagh, argh—"

He abruptly heard the scream of one of the Chinese men. It was the voice of the man driving the motorcycle Lin was on. When Lin spun around, he saw a silhouette into his field of vision. A man in black clothes shifted in the dim lighting. He was tall and held a long weapon: a Japanese sword.

The man had first stabbed the Chinese man in the arm and knocked his handgun out of his hand with a scabbard. He then went after the other two on the first motorcycle. The Chinese men hastily fired at the black figure rushing up to them, but the man had dodged all the bullets. As soon as he was close enough, the man swung his Japanese sword, cutting the two down. The Chinese men all fell on the spot. Lin was the only one who remained. Lin swiftly brandished his Chinese knife-pistol and looked over the unknown man. The other had took notice of him and made bold steps towards him. Lin immediately blocked his attacks with the blade of his knife. The blades clashed with a high pitched sound.

It was when they got so close they could hear each other's breathing that Lin finally saw his opponent's face.

Lin was startled, peering at the man from the helmet visor.

The man wore a mask.

A red, Niwaka mask.

"...Ba-Banba?"

The man instantly stilled at Lin's voice.

Why is Banba here? Did he get a job from the Noma Group?

Too many questions arose to his mind. Because he was so distraught, he was unprepared for the other's attack. Banba kicked him. Dealing a blow to the stomach, Lin was flown back with great force. He knocked into the concrete wall behind him and collapsed to the ground. During that time, Banba stole one of the motorcycles and gallantly drove off with Kishihara on the back.

Still taken aback, Lin watched him retreat.

"...He can ride a motorcycle?"

Even though he lived with him, he hardly knew anything about him.

But this was not the time to focus on trivial matters. Lin looked around the area.

He clicked his tongue upon seeing the state the Chinese men were in.

The plan failed.



Banba accepted to take Sayuri's place for a certain job when she asked him in the Nakasu nightclub 10thousand. A gang called the Noma Group was in search of a skilled hitman and the job offer was brought to Sayuri, but unfortunately the requirements of the job was not her specialty. Sayuri then pushed the job onto Banba, who happened to be available. Banba was in debt to her for a lot of things. He could not turn her down.

Banba met with the young leader of the Noma Group, Kishihara, in Sayuri's place and was asked to be his bodyguard. He was ordered to beat the men after his life. A hitman's work was not just limited to killing people when working for underground organizations. It was commonplace to do mercenary-like work as well.

That night when Banba accompanied Kishihara, an ambush occurred. A few men on motorcycles were after Kishihara. Banba never expected someone he knew well to be involved in the attack though.

After he had escaped with the stolen motorcycle, Kishihara on back, Banba brought his client to the Noma Group's headquarters. Kishihara had lost interest in going to the sports gym.

"You worked well today."

Kishihara thanked Banba in a private room where several of his henchmen were stationed and gave him his payment. He was told it was his bonus.

"I was saved because of you. That should have taught those Chinese men a lesson."

After Banba took the additional payment, he put it in his pocket.

"Until next time."

Banba nodded wordlessly at his client's farewell and left their headquarters.



"Dammit!"

Lin shouted and kicked over a nearby chair once he had returned to the Chinese men's hideout.

"Hey, what's wrong?"

"Where's Kishihara?"

The Chinese men leaned over and questioned Lin. Lin answered them, irritated.

"Does it look like the plan went well?"

The plan had failed. Not only did they not succeed in kidnapping Kishihara, but three men came out as casualties. The men on the motorcycles besides Lin were sent to an underground doctor the group was affiliated with.

"What happened?"

The man with the qualities of a leader asked him. Lin then explained the details of what transpired from beginning to end.

"The Noma Group also hired a hitman...Have you heard of the Niwaka Samurai before? He's the stupid-looking killer who wears a mask."

The moment they heard what Lin said, they all turned pale. "What did you say?"

"The Niwaka Samurai?" "It can't be, that big shot...!" They all murmured to themselves and exchanged glances.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Lin grew sullen, seeing the Chinese men cower in fear.

"Why are you looking like that? You don't plan to pull out of this are you? Are you alright with them getting away with it?"

"But the opponent is the Niwaka Samurai." One of the members refuted. "I've heard rumors about him. He's the killer of killers, the strongest in Fukuoka--"

"And so what?"

Lin cut off the man and yelled.

"They were the ones who started all of this in the first place."

This Chinese group was only doing business. And then the Noma Group butted in. They got offended, hurt one of their comrades and then finished him off. The moment the men heard the name of the Niwaka Samurai they became uncertain, so Lin added to stir them up. “You were just doing work. And yet they blew it out of proportion. Don’t you think that’s unforgivable?”

Banba’s face suddenly came to his mind. Lin was just cleaning, but the selfish man had one-sidedly raged at him and left the house. It was because of him that the plan failed. Lin grew more frustrated.

“Are you just going to sit idly on this?”

He clenched his fists tightly. *I’m going to give Banba a lesson*, Lin decided internally and then instigated the men.

“If you’re just going to call it quits, your friend in heaven will grieve.”

The Chinese men’s expressions changed when he uttered the word ‘friend.’

“Yeah, he’s right.”

“At this rate, Zhou won’t be put to rest.”

“Let’s do it.”

“Let’s get back at them.”

The Chinese men congregated around the Mahjong table. They began to discuss how to get revenge.

After a while, they came to a decision.

“If the Niwaka Samurai is going to accompany Kishihara, then we can just go after his subordinates. They interfered with our deals too many times. So we’ll interfere with theirs.”

“That sounds good.”

“Let’s do that.”

They seemed to have devised a plan to attack them during a drug trade deal and steal their money and products.

Lin made a call as soon as the Chinese men made their resolve. Enokida picked up immediately. ‘Hello?’

“Hey, mushroom.”

‘Ah, it’s you again. Did you make up with Banba-san by now?’

Lin scowled when Enokida mentioned his name. “Nope. I’m about to go into an all-out-war with him.”

‘...What?’

Enokida replied back, astonished.

Lin paid him no mind and stated his business. "I want information on the Noma Group's business deals. Find them as fast as you can."

Bottom of the Fourth Inning

"Looks like you know something, don't you?"

Ricardo reacted slightly when Martinez mentioned the Chinese group. He was a DEA agent. He must be well informed with anything pertaining to those occupations.

"Hey, Rico. What are you looking for this time?"

"Next question." Ricardo continued with the interrogation without answering Martinez's question. "Do you know the guy who sold me out nine years ago?"

Martinez thought back when asked. That was back when he was still part of the cartel. Don Ramiro had a secret meeting with an agent. Martinez, as his second-hand man, accompanied him. It took place at a bar Ramiro frequented in Veracruz. There, Ramiro had bribed the investigator in person for information. The man told him, 'Richard Louis who was working as a courier for the Veracruz cartel is a spy.'

Martinez had also known Louis. The man had joined the cartel a few years prior. There was nothing unsatisfactory with his work. So he did not expect his real identity to be Ricardo Seiya Ortega, the name of a DEA agent and their traitor. All the drugs he had smuggled were confiscated by the investigator agency. Naturally Don Ramiro was furious to learn this revelation. He ordered his men to have Louis captured at once. And Martinez was ordered to torture him. Martinez thought back on the man who had met with Ramiro in that Mexican bar, recalling the tattletale's face who sold Ricardo out to the cartel, and answered. "He said he was someone who had power in the police, but I don't know his name. However, I did see his face. He was Latino."

"Was he a Mexican police officer?"

"Maybe. It's a den of corrupt officers over there."

Because of the drug war, the members in the cartel naturally had shootouts with the police on a daily basis. And police officers made meager salary despite it being a life-risking job. There were people who would sell out their comrades for extra coin or let drug dealers go for a bride. There was even an instance in the past where a writer that inconvenienced the cartel was erased and a

Mexican police officer covered up the murder. The police were not the only ones corrupted; the politicians were too. Even high officials who insisted on exterminating drugs had deep connections to the cartel.

"I'll give you the man's features, so bring in a portrait artist next time." Martinez suggested.

Nine years have passed since then. The man could have already quit the police. It was also not a rare occurrence for police officers to become a *narco* in Mexico.

"Was that the last of what you wanted to ask me?"

Ricardo fell silent at Martinez's question.

Martinez thought the interrogation was over, but he still had something to ask. After a few moments, he spoke. "...Why did you save me back then?"



Back then, that one instance that took place in a hotel nine years ago.

"Adios, investigator."

The moment the Veracruz executioner raised his knife, Ricardo anticipated his death. He gave up on surviving and closed his eyes, relaxing his whole body and awaited for Alex's blow.

But the blade Alex swung down did not touch Ricardo's body. Instead, it had cut the rope binding Ricardo. After he untied his hands, he then cut the rope tying Ricardo's legs.

"...Hey, what's the meaning of this?"

Ricardo's eyes widened, stunned to suddenly be released.

Alex did not answer his question. He just ordered him to stay still and neatly wiped off the blood from Ricardo's body with a towel.

Ricardo was bewildered, wondering what his intentions were.

"To stop the bleeding." Alex replied in answer and began to wrap bandages around his body. "I didn't cut you deeply. They're just incisions."

Ricardo watched the killer proceed with attending to his wounds skillfully, dumbfounded.

What is this? What is this man planning? Don Ramiro had ordered him to kill me. And yet, why is he...?

“...You won’t kill me?”

Ricardo asked softly.

“No, I won’t.”

Alex replied immediately. “I’m going to let you go.”

Ricardo questioned what he heard when those unbelievable words fell from the killer’s lips. “What did you say?”

“Stay quiet. Or else the people on watch will hear.”

He was right; Ramiro’s henchmen were stationed outside the room. Ricardo bit his tongue.

“Here, it’s water.” Alex took out a plastic water bottle from the refrigerator and handed it over to Ricardo. “Drink all of it and go take a piss. It’ll help get the drug out of your system.”

Ricardo did as instructed and drank all the mineral water before using the restroom. When he returned, Alex asked him. “Can you walk?”

“Yeah, I can manage.”

He was still shaky, but he should be fine with short breaks.

“There are two men on watch in front of the door.”

“...What do you plan on doing?” Ricardo frowned. *What does he plan to do to get me out of here?*

Alex then picked up the hotel’s telephone and made a call somewhere.

“...Ah, hello? Is this the front desk? I want room service. Yes, please. I’d like the breakfast set.”

Room service?

Once Alex hung up, Ricardo questioned him in a small voice. “Hey, this isn’t the time or place to have a meal.”

“I’m very much aware.” Alex scowled at him. “A boy from the hotel will come here soon. We’re going to knock him out and steal his clothes.”

So he intended to have him pretend to be the service boy and sneak out of the hotel. Ricardo followed his plan now. However, he did not understand the crucial details. Ricardo asked. “...Why are you helping me?”

Alex made a mischievous smile and winked at him.

“Your face is my type, so I think it would be a shame to kill you.”



Afterwards, Ricardo changed into the service boy's clothes to pretend to be a hotel employee and escape, allowing him to return to his comrades at the DEA safely. He had been saved by the hitman of the drug cartel, the Veracruz executioner.

"...Why did you save me back then?"

The issue had kept tugging at his mind for the past nine years, unaware of the reason. Ricardo did not believe the hitman saved him just because he felt like it.

"I told you, right?" In front of him, Alex — José Martinez smirked. "That your face is my type."

Frustrated that the man did not answer him seriously, Ricardo punched him in the stomach. Martinez groaned and glared back, "that hurt. Don't punch me."

"You make me sick," Ricardo returned the glare and cursed him. "You damn homo."

Martinez smiled wryly. "Seriously, homophobes can't take a joke."

"The next time you pull that, I'll strike you against your bald head."

Ricardo threatened in a low growl.

"Okay. I'll talk."

Martinez shrugged in resignation.

"I saved you because I came to despise drugs."

Ricardo cocked his head, taken aback when the unthinkable statement came from the former hitman of a drug cartel. "What do you mean?"

"I was considering to leave the organization back then."

Martinez began to languidly explain what had happened at the time in a calm manner.

"A certain politician was connected with Ramiro Sanchez. But that wasn't anything unusual in Mexico. The police and the politicians were all after extra cash from the cartels. And that politician was no different."

As he stated, the country was corrupt. Politicians had a give-and-take relationship with drug cartels.

"However, one journalist was sticking his nose in that politician's corruption. He was attempting to expose the connection between the politician and the cartel to correct this mad world."

"A model journalist."

However, a brave reporter doing righteous acts was seen as a reckless fool to the drug cartels. It was said more than one hundred journalists were killed in Mexico since 2007.

“And the politician consulted Don Ramiro on his problem. He told him he needed him to do something as the elections were going on. So Ramiro ordered me to do it.”

“To kill the journalist?”

“No.” Martinez shook his head. “His family.”

He sighed slightly before continuing on.

“‘Kill that man’s relatives one by one in the most cruel way possible so he won’t feel like sniffing around again and so he could quit his journalist job.’ That was my order. I would receive 1000 peso for each person. Pretty extraordinary, right?.”

One peso was roughly worth five to six yen. The price was far too low for the worth of a human life.

“So, what did you do?”

“I first went to his home to check it out. I wouldn’t say the journalist had a luxurious life. He had a ton of siblings. Lots of young little brothers and sisters... just like I had.”

His tone sounded somewhat self-ridiculing. Ricardo did not say anything and kept listening to Martinez’s tale.

“I was reminded of my family in that moment. My brothers I had living in the Dominican Republic. And that was when I had the thought: what if someone was after my own family exactly like this. I couldn’t handle it...thinking each of my siblings to be taken from me for no more than 1000 pesos.”

Martinez kept going.

“That was when I realized. I was doing exactly that. I suddenly came to despise everything I took part in. The drugs, Don Ramiro, the cartel, and even myself who was a part of that. And then I began to think of getting out of the organization. I loathed the current, rotten state Mexico was in which would take the general, innocent citizens’ lives because of drugs. ...And that was when you were caught.”

The hell Ricardo did not want to remember followed after.

“Ramiro ordered me to torture you.”

And this man had hurt him.

“Yeah, you did.” Ricardo surly bit back. “That hurt like hell. I thought I was going to die.”

“I didn’t want to kill people anymore. I wanted to save you. Ramiro had told me he would drop by to see how it was going later, so I had to cut you up a bit for show.”

“Yeah, a little bit. Just in thirty places.”

“I avoided your vitals.”

“Why thank you.”

Martinez smiled bitterly at Ricardo’s sarcastic retort.

Ricardo could tell this man was not lying. He now knew the reason why he had saved him, so he moved onto the next question. “You vanished after you saved me. What kind of magic did you use to accomplish that feat?”

By the time Ricardo returned to work after being saved by Alex, having taken time off to recuperate, Don Ramiro had been arrested and the Veracruz cartel had been dismantled. Ricardo was stunned when he heard that neither the DEA or Mexican police were responsible for their demise; it was the work of the hitman from that very cartel. And immediately afterwards, the hitman had completely vanished.

“Ramiro traded drugs and weapons to terrorist organizations in the middle east. As such, the CIA were involved. I sold information to the CIA on Ramiro and the cartel in exchange to escape overseas through the WITSEC program.”

From drug cartels and terrorist groups to even the American secret services. Ricardo snorted. “That sounds like a scenario in a movie.”

“I got the Ariel award.”

Ricardo ignored Martinez’s joke and continued onto the next question.

“So then you came to Japan?”

“Yeah, I came to Fukuoka under a new identity and started out living in a cheap apartment where illegal immigrants resided. After some time had passed, I picked up torture work. Which brings us to the present.”

Don Ramiro and several executives were arrested due to the information the hitman Alex leaked, and the Veracruz cartel fell apart. Ricardo had heard rumor that a surviving faction of the group started a new clique, but the CIA had considered Alex’s accomplishments to be impactful for cutting off the terrorists

group's major source of income. So much so they allowed the hitman to escape overseas.

"Sorry about what happened back then, Rico."

Martinez offered a sudden apology. "You can hurt me as much as you want until you're satisfied. I'm ready."

The former killer expressed modestly. Ricardo sneered. "I have no intention of getting rid of my grudge against you nor do I plan on forgiving you."

"Then what do you want me to do?"

There was a reason Ricardo had captured this man. Ricardo did not want to run into him originally, but he had value. He could possibly use this man.

Ricardo stated in a low voice. "Infiltrate the Noma Group."

"...What did you say?"

Martinez was taken aback.

"I'm currently in the Noma Group as a dealer, but they've become aware of the presence of a spy. I was just considering to pull out. But you can sneak in for me."

Martinez made a dry laugh. "Come on, are you telling me to pretend to be one of those narco bastards?"

"I am. Approach them as a dealer and get information from them."

"I'm not kidding. I can't do that."

"It should be easy for you as you used to be a *narco*."

"And what will happen if I get caught? I'll be killed."

"Then try not to be found out. You're a criminal, so they'll trust you."

"On that note," Martinez could not easily agree to the conditions. "Why do I have to do something so dangerous?"

"Do you think you're in a position to refuse?"

Ricardo then made another threat. "If you won't do as I say, I'll toss you to the ICPO."

Martinez's complexion changed when he heard the term. "...So it's come to using Interpol." He seemed familiar with them.

"Under the Mexican police's request, the ICPO has put out a bounty for Alejandro Rodriguez internationally. Your charges are fifty-six murders, seventy-two assaults--"

"Hey, hold on." Martinez cut Ricardo off and frowned. "I only killed about thirty

people.”

“It is from Ramiro Sanchez’s statement. He’s blaming you for crimes which got exaggerated during investigation.”

Martinez tutted. “...That damn old man.”

“There’s still other charges. Twenty-four robberies, and one rape.”

Martinez’s eye widened. “Wha-? Rape?”

“You took advantage of a police officer, didn’t you? He was a young, Mexican man.”

He scowled, recalling the past. “Absolutely not. That was consensual.”

“I don’t care about your sex life. No matter how many people you’ve killed, or if you’ve violated someone or not, it does not change the fact that you’re a criminal. If you don’t listen to me, I’ll hand you over to the ICPO.”

After he stated that, Ricardo smirked.

“Or should I let Don Ramiro know where you are? That old man would love to meet a traitor like you. When I saw him in prison, he entrusted me with a message: ‘You must miss your hometown, right? I’ll place your head in front of the statue of Columbus.’”

Martinez grimaced, probably thinking of the face of his former boss.

“...What a terrifying old man.”

“If you don’t want that, then follow my orders.”

Ricardo thought he would have relented by now, but Martinez was still reluctant.

“Hold on. That isn’t sufficient. There are not enough merits. I want some benefits out of this too.”

So he won’t do it for free? What a persistent guy. Ricardo sighed. “What do you want? A new identity? If you succeed in sneaking and investigating, I could get you another person’s ID through the DEA protection program and let you flee to another country.”

“I’d rather have my bounty taken down. I want to live peacefully in this city. You have connections in Interpol, right?”

He did. Ricardo nodded. “I’ll think about it.”

“...You’re a terrible liar.” Martinez glared at him dubiously, but he seemed to prepare himself for the worst. “Anyway, I suppose I don’t have the right to refuse in the end. I’ll help you, Rico.”

Negotiations were complete.

Ricardo uncuffed Martinez. Once he untied his limbs, he handed Martinez a plastic leg brace as he rubbed his wrists. "Put this on."

"What is it?"

"A GPS device. This way I know where you are. If you try to escape to another prefecture or try to take it off, an alarm will go off on my device to notify me."

Martinez made an openly annoyed expression. "Isn't this something American criminals usually wear?"

It was. It was a device for criminal investigators, information providers, and undercover operatives to keep track of villains released out into the world, starting from sexual predators who had a high chance of getting a second offense.

"Come on, you're telling me to wear the same time as criminals?"

"Do you have a problem with it? You're a criminal yourself."

"...Okay."

After he cursed, Martinez unwilling obeyed. "I won't run even without wearing this." He muttered complaints.

"That reminds me," Martinez changed the topic once he put the GPS on his right leg. "How come DEA agents are looking into the Noma Group?"

"It's not just the Noma Group."

Ever since Operation Condor took place in the 1970s when herbicides were sprayed onto opium fields in the mountain districts, the American Drug Enforcement Association partook in eliminating drug cartels in Mexico and anyone associated with them. The reason Ricardo, an agent for the DEA, was deployed to the Fukuoka area was related to cartel activity.

"In the past couple of years, the cartels have started to move their operations to Asia. Out of the forty dealers who were arrested in China, one was Mexican. And in the Philippines, three people affiliated to the Sinaloa cartel were arrested."



The Mexican drug cartels were currently looking for another place to carry out business. Asia was the number one option.

“They may arrive in Japan soon. And Fukuoka has many foreigners coming in and out and can act as a central route out of the other cities.”

“I see,” Martinez nodded. The former hitman was smarter than he looked, grasping the general outline. “The drug cartels and the Noma Group may have a connection, so you’re on the lookout for any activity from them in the city?”

“Exactly.”

The DEA sent their agents undercover over to Asian countries, keeping watch on the flying sparks

“Damn...cartels are such a pain in the ass.”

Martinez forcibly sighed.

from the sudden outburst of the drug war that took off in Mexico spreading to other countries.

Fifth Inning

Top of the Fifth Inning

It had been roughly two weeks since the three men from the drug cartel Los Eses had arrived in Fukuoka. They were selling their smuggled drugs well. The plan was going smoothly.

“...So anyway, is there any better containers for this stuff?”

Ocho complained as they walked down a street in Tenjin with the guitar cases strapped over their shoulders. Inside the cases were not guitars. Uno had guns, Ocho had rifles, and Treinta had blades; each a weapon of their choice. They had heard this city had an abundance of hitmen, so they carried out weapons on their person, but Ocho did not take a liking to using these cases.

“We have no other option. This is Japan. As if we could walk around with rifle cases.”

“But do we really have to use guitar cases?”

“Then write your name on the case. Or else you’ll confuse which one is yours.”

Ocho scowled at him. “But we look like an Antonio Banderas mariachi band.”

“So our band name is the Trio los Eses.”

Uno cracked a joke, but Ocho shot back, “that’s so lame.”

“You haven’t stopped complaining once.” Uno sighed. “We have to use something so we don’t look like drug dealers.”

“We already look awfully suspicious.”

The three multinational men wore sunglasses and had guitar cases in hand. There was no way there would not stand out even among the many other foreigners in Fukuoka. There were some passerby who looked back to examine them.

“Hey, they’re looking at us. Smile.” Uno jabbed Ocho with his elbow. “Pretend to be a cheerful guitarist.”

“Do-mo, kon-nichi-wa~.”

The one passerby was taken aback and ran off when Ocho gave him a smile and spoke broken Japanese.

“Tch, he ran. That fucker.”

“Don’t let it bother you,” Uno patted Ocho’s shoulder. “The Japanese are shy.”

"My wife is not."

They hurried to their destination as they chatted. After they had walked for a while, they saw the Tenjin west street come into view. It was crowded with masses of young people.

Treinta had been silent the whole time. He was not talkative like Ocho, but today he had not said a single word.

"¿Qué pasa, Treinta? ¿Qué tienes?"

"Tengo hambre."

"He's been doing nothing but puking his guts out. Of course he would be famished." Uno smiled wryly.

Each time they took the fishing boat to transport their goods, Treinta would get sea sick.

"He has to do things at his own pace." Ocho remarked. "Anyway, how about we go get something to eat? Maybe sushi. We've been here in Fukuoka for some time now, and yet we haven't had any real Japanese food."

"We're to meet up with someone at the restaurant we're going to today. We can eat there."

Uno told them as they took a corner.

They arrived at a central American restaurant located off the west street in a small alley.

"...This is Mexican food."

Ocho made a displeased face when he saw the restaurant's sign and menu.

"They have Colombian food too. And Peruvian cuisine."

"The variety isn't the issue. Where is the Japanese food?"

Uno entered the restaurant, bringing in Ocho, muttering complaints all the while, and the starved Treinta.

The Central American cuisine restaurant Moreno was fairly large. It had numerous tables, counter seats and booths set up inside. The restaurant's background music was Latino music they heard often in their home country, and it looked like customers could enjoy a show while having their meal.

Currently a central American guitarist was about to begin a live performance.

The person they were going to meet with was already there. He was at a table further inside. He was a Japanese man named Yakuin and their assistant for their current plan. He was well-informed about the drugs in Fukuoka and had

connections with multiple drug organizations in the city. They were introduced to him by the Chinese dealers they were hired by at the moment. They were told to ask this man about drug dealers in Fukuoka.

“You’re Yakuin?”

The man nodded. “Yeah, I am.”

“I’m Uno. This is Ocho and Treinta.”

They made introductions and shook hands.

“Nice to meet you. Want anything to drink?”

“I’ll have a beer.” Uno said.

“I’ll have tequila.” Ocho added.

“...”

Yakuin asked Treinta, who stared at the menu in silence. “And how about you?”

“...”

“Ah, sorry. He doesn’t understand Japanese.”

Uno ordered a drink for him in his place. They ordered their food as they listened to the live music the guitarist was playing.

After a few minutes, their food was brought to them. Once the salad hors d’oeuvres, tacos, quesadillas, and pozole were laid out on the table, they raised their glasses and toasted.

Treinta frowned as he put the food in his mouth and muttered. “*¿Qué es esto? ¿Comida de cerdo?*” (*What is this? Food for pigs?*)

“What was that?” Yakuin tilted his head. He then turned to look at Uno’s face.

“What did he say?”

“This restaurant’s tacos are superb.” Uno replied.

“So what do you want from me?”

Yakuin turned the topic to work as they consumed the beer and ate their food.

Uno stated their business. “We would like your help.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“We’re thinking of starting up a marijuana business in Fukuoka.”

Yakuin’s eyes turn wide. “Marijuana?”

“Yeah. The era for marijuana is coming.” Uno explained resolutely.

The movement to legalize marijuana was occurring throughout the world, beginning in America in Washington State and Colorado. And so the drug cartels in Mexico began to put effort into the marijuana business.

Cartels of today were dealing merchandise from Mexico, Colombia, and Jamaica that were geared towards America. They vied over bringing in the goods to America by either crossing over the border via truck, carry them over the Caribbean on a ship, or transport them on a Cessna plane. But with one of the states legalizing marijuana, it had not only increased the demand for it but the supply had also rapidly increased. If someone wanted it, it was easy to obtain it. So now there would be more clients desiring high quality material.

“But it’s not like we can earn the same amount of profits in another place.”

Ocho cut in.

Treinta, unable to understand Japanese, did not participate in the discussion and quietly ate his food. “*Este chorizo, si está bien.*” (*This chorizo is pretty good.*)

While other cartels sold off Central American marijuana cheap, the marketplace was trying to sell rarer, higher quality Australian brands. And that was what Los Eses were after.

“Australian products? That seems good.” Yakuin murmured.

There were other advantages to sell Australian goods. In the case the movement for marijuana legalization moved to Asia, the circulation route for Australian branded merchandise would be Los Eses’ solely. It would be a prior investment, so to speak. They wanted to create the foundations. And for that to happen, they needed a point of distribution — a city that could act as their base of operations like Veracruz was for them in Mexico.

And so, the Los Eses turned their attention towards Fukuoka. If they obtained Fukuoka city, which was called the entrance to Asia with it being nearby other countries, many routes would be open to them. If they brought the goods made in Australia to Fukuoka, they could then distribute it to Korea, China, North Korea, and the Eurasia continent. And if they went through Tokyo, they could even smuggle merchandise from Hawaii to America. If they send their products to Hokkaido, then they could do business in Russia via the Sea of Okhotsk. Operating out of Fukuoka, from producing the drugs to selling and distribution — in short, creating the Fukuoka cartel was Los Eses’ plan.

“We’re currently selling to some Chinese men.”

For the past couple of days, they had contacted a Chinese dealer group, and they became their patronage to sell Los Eses’ products.

“But they’re just a group of ten people. We need a larger organization who’d assist us.”

“Quiero algo dulce.” (I want something sweet.)

Uno continued with the discussion, ignoring Treinta.

“We heard there’s some yakuza dealing drugs in Fukuoka called the Noma Group.”

“I suppose the Noma Group has been the most active.” Yakuin remarked.

“There was the Mutagawa Group that sold drugs and weapons, but the executives and their members were killed recently, and now they aren’t that big. A Hong Kong organization called Showan tried to move to Fukuoka as well, but they dispersed a few months ago.”

Yakuin, a current seller, had credibility on the topic.

“So you’re saying you want me to refer you guys to the Noma Group.”

Put frankly, that was what they wanted, but there was one issue which made the request not so straightforward.

“...As troubling as it is,” Uno looked reluctant. “Apparently the Chinese group we employed is having a dispute with the Noma Group.”

“Ah, I see.”

“We asked the Chinese group to distribute our products in Nakasu. But apparently that was the Noma Group’s turf, and one Chinese guy got killed.”

“¿Cuál comeré? ¿Helado de coco or gelatine de mango?” (What should I get? Coconut ice cream or mango jelly?)

“The Chinese group went into a frenzy, and now they’re attacking members from the Noma Group.”

Yakuin crossed his arms and groaned.

“That is definitely a problem.”

“Yeah, they’re causing us a lot of issues.”

Ocho chimed in while downing his third glass of tequila.

“Yeah, I guess they would be.” Yakuin placed a hand against his chin and thought on what to do. “Then you have no other option but to break away from the Chinese and team up with the Noma Group. The Noma Group has connections in the NLD and OBD. They bribe them for intel. If you’re going to do business in this city, having them as an ally would be to your benefit.”

“Same guys everywhere, no matter what police division they are in.” The

former corrupt cop Ocho laughed.

Gaining the assistance of the local mafia to do business with other countries would be conventional for drug cartels. It was unique the Noma Group had the advantage of having friends in the police.

“The problem would be how to get the Noma Group on board.”

“What should we do, Uno?” Ocho asked.

“I have an idea. If we use the Chinese men as bait, they should take it.” Uno smirked. “Now with that decided, let’s get right to it. Yakuin, please contact someone at the Noma Group.”

Bottom of the Fifth Inning

Pressured by the DEA agent Ricardo, Martinez ended up being forced to enter the drug industry. He was not enthusiastic about it, but he had to do the job well since he had accepted the conditions. First he made an appointment over the phone and got permission to discuss business with the head of the Noma Group, Kishihara.

Kishihara’s office was in west Nakasu. It was on the second floor of a building along the river, which had a sign hung in the front that read, “Noma Commercial Affairs.” Several stern looking men greeted Martinez as he arrived at the office on time. They brought him to Kishihara’s personal room further inside, and Martinez stepped in. When he did, his eyes widened in shock. A tall man stood right beside Kishihara. He wore an unsettling outfit, consisting of a pure black suit similar to funeral clothes and a Niwaka mask that covered his face.

Martinez recognized who the man was immediately.

Hold on a sec, that’s Banba.

His eyes met with Banba’s through the mask. He could not give an over-familiar greeting like, “hey Banba! What are you doing here?” Martinez nonchalantly averted his gaze and pretended he was a stranger. Banba must have wanted that as well.

“Thank you for the other day, Kishihara-san.” Martinez sat down on the reception chair to face Kishihara and forced a smile. “You have a unique bodyguard working for you.”

“So what do you want?”

Kishihara ignored Martinez’s comment and went straight to business. Martinez

was grateful. He wanted to hurry up with this conversation and leave as soon as possible.

“I have an earnest request.”

“A request?”

“I would like to distribute your products.”

Kishihara gave him a dubious look at his sudden request. As he expected, he was weary.

If he got suspected, that was the end. Martinez made a blatant smile to discern his aim. “Being a torturer isn’t very profitable. I was considering to start a new occupation.”

“So you want to be our dealer?”

“Yes.” He looked the man over and added. “You said it earlier, right? That you’d use my services again. Then why not hire me? I have quite a few clients in the underground, and I think I can do good work.”

Ksihihara fell silent.

The silence persisted. Martinez got nervous, wondering if he had said something wrong. How could he avoid being found out that a DEA agent instigated this? Martinez awaited, nearly praying for Kishihara to speak. After a few moments, Kishihara smirked.

“...Fine.”

Martinez sighed in relief internally. *Thank god, he didn’t suspect me.*

“We mainly deal stimulants and narcotics. We just got another load of stimulants in. How much would you like?”

Martinez proceeded with the conversation as according to Ricardo’s plan.

“Alright...How does three hundred thousand worth in yen sound to start out?”

“Sounds good.” Kishihara glanced to the clock hung on the wall and stated.

“Go to the second floor of the multistory parking lot in Nakasu an hour from now. My subordinates are waiting there.”

“Okay.”

After giving a smirk towards Banba out of Kishihara’s sight, Martinez headed out of the room.

After he had left the Noma Group office, Martinez wandered around the area for a few minutes. Once he confirmed no one was following him, he went over to a nearby coin parking lot. A black car was parked in one of the spaces. He

saw Ricardo in the driver's seat.

"How did it go?"

Ricardo questioned Martinez as he got into the passenger's seat in a low voice.

"It went well," Martinez gave a large sigh after he answered him. "Man, I broke a sweat from that."

I'm unusually nervous. I got this stressed out just for carrying out one drug deal. Undercover agents have it rough, he thought keenly.

"I did as you asked. I ordered three hundred thousand worth of the stuff."

"Alright, that's good."

"What about the money for it?"

"I'll pay for it." Ricardo took out a stack of bills from the dashboard.

Martinez made a sound of surprise when he saw that.

"Paying with your own money? The DEA sure pays well."

"Don't be stupid. It's just expenses."

"There's no receipt for it."

Martinez smiled as he took the ten thousand yen bills.



Ricardo drove to the multistory parking lot in Nakasu as Kishihara had instructed with Martinez accompanying him in the passenger's seat. He parked alongside the road nearby. The deal would take place at 9:30 this evening. They decided to wait here until the appointed time came.

"...We got nothing to do. Shall we have some small talk?"

"Shut up and be quiet," Ricardo instantly turned down Martinez's suggestion.

He faced the man sitting in the passenger's seat and pointed a finger to his face.

"Listen up. I'll tell you frankly. I've hated your guts for a long time, and I have no intention of becoming friends with you. You can just shut your trap and follow my orders."

He snapped, irritated, but the other easily brushed his comment aside. "You're no fun," Martinez replied cheerfully.

Ricardo scowled. He leaned back against his seat and glared at Martinez. He despised this side of him. He regularly looked composed and cracked jokes. His speech and conduct were to make fun of people, and that always annoyed him.

But they still had twenty minutes to go. They had nothing to do as he said. He could not stand spending time with this man in a small space of the vehicle in complete silence.

“...Hey,” Ricardo spoke up first. “Why do you work as a torturer?”

Martinez laughed, “so you are going to turn to small talk.” After Ricardo glared at him once more, Martinez shrugged and began his tale, face turning serious.

“After I got a new ID from the CIA and arrived in Fukuoka City, I lived in a cheap apartment in Oyafukou. Other illegal immigrants hung out there, and everyone lived there for a set of circumstances like me. And then an Asian man I knew gave me a job. It was to torture a certain man. Since then I continued doing the same work and by the time I realized it that was my steady occupation.”

Ricardo cocked his head. “I can’t understand you. You hated how the cartel did things, and that’s why you fled over here, right?”

Didn’t you come to hate murdering people and ran away from the underground world to start a new life?

Martinez nodded in response, “yeah, I did.”

He only grew more confused. *Then, why?* “Did you not consider trying to do an honest job?”

“I did.” Martinez promptly replied. “I actually did give it a shot, and I still do it on occasion.”

That reminds me, he mentioned that he works as a chiropractor when I first encountered him here. So that wasn’t a lie?

Martinez then added. “However, I’ve lived killing people since I was sixteen. It’s far too late for me to pull out of this industry.”

“That’s just an excuse.” Ricardo snorted. “Just by relocating from Veracruz to Fukuoka didn’t change a single thing you do. You’re still a horrid criminal.”

“That may be true,” the other man had a bitter smile at Ricardo’s harsh critique.

“But I have changed in some ways. I’m not a hitman anymore. I don’t have to kill people.”

“But a torturer is similar.”

“I concur.” Martinez did not agree. “The biggest taboo for a torturer to commit is to easily kill their target. It’s fundamentally different from a hitman.”

Torture was a process to keep someone alive. To extend their life as much as possible. It was necessary to take the body into consideration to avoid killing

them or making them pass out. The former Veracruz Executioner talked at length about that.

“And so, a torturer has to be kind, loving, and a gentleman.”

“But in the end you kill your targets, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” Martinez nodded. “Naturally depending on the client’s request, there are time when I have to kill someone. But the thing is most of those guys are villains to begin with. I choose jobs that don’t involve innocent citizens like I got in the past.”

‘But I have changed in some ways.’

Ricardo thought over on what Martinez said. It was true. This man had changed quite a bit. And not just his looks but internally as well.

When he was in the cartel he was bloodthirsty and harder to get close to than now. He was said to be a cold-blooded. The executioner Alex would shoot his target in the head or heart to instantly kill them without a trace of hesitation, and he was feared by everyone around him to be a heartless killer.

But what if that was inaccurate? What if this man’s merciless methods were actually his form of kindness by letting his targets pass without pain?

He instantly did not know how to pin the hitman Alex. Even though he had changed his name to José Martinez now, Ricardo was still unable to get an idea on this man’s true nature.

So is he a good guy? Or a bad guy? Was he always a good guy? Or is he just pretending to be a good guy?

He did not know. He grew more confused. And yet it was puzzling.

It did not change the fact that this man was a criminal. As such, he had no way of knowing when he would betray him. He could not trust him. Even as he told himself this, some part of him was glad to have him as an ally.

Ricardo still felt the same emotions he did in the Veracruz hotel nine years ago — that this man would help him. Alex had that appeal to him even back then. He had the durability to pull himself out of situations and put down others’ chances. That was why Don Ramiro had always had this dependable man at his side. He acknowledged his ability out of everyone else, and needed Alex to return alive in the battles with other opposing organizations in the city than the other members in the cartel.

“Even as I say that, I can’t become a good person now.” Martinez said as though

to himself, his eyes having a far off look. "So at least I wanted to become a good bad guy."

When he glanced at the clock, he saw that twenty minutes had gone by. The appointed time was drawing near.

"...It's about time." Martinez opened the passenger seat door. "I'm going."

Ricardo stated while still facing forward. "Don't screw up."

"Can't you give something more encouraging? Like, 'good luck,' or 'be careful?'"

"Once it's over, come back here. Got it?" Ricardo ignored Martinez's rebuttal and emphasized once more. "Don't run away."

"I got it. Alright then, see you later."

Martinez took off, waving one hand.



As he turned a corner the three-story parking lot came into view. Martinez headed inside and went up to the second floor. There was a black van parked on the second floor further in. Two men wearing suits stood next to the vehicle. "Hey," Martinez greeted as he approached them. "You guys work for Kishihara-san?"

"Yes." The man nodded. "You're the new dealer, right? We heard about you." They took out a case from the backseat and opened it up.

"Here is the merchandise."

Inside were small vinyl bags with white powder in them. They were stimulants.

"Want a sample?"

"No, thanks." Martinez shook his head. "I have faith in your boss. Besides, I hate drugs. I refuse to take stimulants on principle."

"What a good mental fortitude to have. Having drug addicts as dealers are the worst for us to deal with."

"Here, the payment as promised."

Martinez handed over the money he received from Ricardo. "Check it."

The man nodded after counting the banknotes. "Three hundred thousand yen as expected."

"Then the transaction is complete."

The man went to give Martinez the bag of fine powder from the case. But

suddenly, they heard the sound of an engine. When they spun around, they saw black shapes. There were two motorcycles speeding towards them. The lights blinded them, hindering their sight. Martinez tightly closed his eyes and stepped back.

“Who are you!?” He heard one of the Noma Group’s men shout.

Martinez held out a hand to block the light and looked around. There were two people on each motorcycle, a total of four. The men wore solid black clothes with full face helmets and were closing in on them. Martinez caught sight of one of the men on the back seat holding a gun.

“Crap, run-”

Martinez yelled and instantly went into motion. Immediately after, a gunshot went off. He heard someone groan, and the man who got shot fell to the ground.

“Shit!”

Another man from the Noma Group clicked his tongue. He was firing back at the enemy, using the car door as a shield. Gunshots, muffled from the suppressor, continued to go off in succession.

“...Come on, are you serious?”

Martinez tutted at the abrupt shoot out. *What on earth is going on? This took a sudden turn of events, damn. I’m unlucky.*

At this rate, I’ll get shot too. I need to hide somewhere. Martinez rounded behind a pillar in the parking garage to avoid the bullets.

After a few minutes, the gunshots ceased. The other man must have been killed.

Martinez was the only one left.

“We know you’re there,” a voice, thick with a Chinese accent, called out to him.

“Come out.”

This isn’t good, Martinez tutted again. There were four armed men. And he was unarmed.

I have to call for help. Martinez reached for his right leg.



Ten minutes had passed since Martinez went to the exchange point. He should

have just went in, gave them the money, and took the drugs. But he seemed to be taking a long time.

Did something happen? Ricardo cocked his head in thought when an alarm went off suddenly in his car. It was an alarm from his tablet equipped with a GPS. For this function to activate meant Martinez forcibly removed the ankle bracelet.

Ricardo's breath caught in his throat.

"...That fucker!" Ricardo cursed.

That man used the three hundred thousand yen as war funds and may be planning to fly away somewhere.

As if I'd let that happen. I won't let him get away.

The mark on the GPS stood still over the multistory parking lot. Ricardo turned on the car and stomped onto the acceleration pedal and sped towards the parking lot. He rushed inside without taking a parking ticket. He ignored the siren that went off and kept going.

Once he reached the second floor, he saw figures there. There were five people. Martinez was among them. He was surrounded by four men wearing helmets, and they were pointing guns at him.

What is this?

Ricardo's eyes widened at the scene.

What the hell is going on?

Who were these people and why were they pointing guns at Martinez? He was unable to comprehend the situation in the moment. However, Ricardo was able to see that Martinez did not betray him or attempt to run away. And that right now he had gotten into trouble.

Martinez was unarmed. He held his hands up in surrender. He could be shot at at any moment. So there was only one action Ricardo could take.

Ricardo floored it, speeding towards the men in front of him. After hitting two of the men out of the four, he slammed on the brakes.

The men that got hit flew back; one collided against the wall of the parking garage, while the other had struck against another parked car. Because they wore full-face helmets, their lives were spared. Ricardo could hear them shouting, "hurry!" and "run for it!" The four men quickly got onto the motorcycles and fled from the scene.

Ricardo got out of the car and rushed over to Martinez. "Alex!"

"...Hey," he raised one hand up. "You saved me, Rico."

"What the hell was that?" Ricardo looked around the area and asked. "What happened here?"

There were two men in suits he thought were from the Noma Group lying on the ground near them. They seemed to have been shot by the other men earlier, as they were bleeding from their chest or head.

"Who were they?"

"Don't know." Martinez grimaced. "Those guys left with the money and the drugs. They targeted us right from the start."

According to Martinez, they had been attacked in the middle of the trade. They were either a group of thieves after money from villains, or they were an opposing organization that came to interfere with the Noma Group's business. Martinez got caught up in the attack and was nearly killed.

"I thought if I did this you'd come in to help."

He broke the GPS device with his ridiculous strength to summon Ricardo as fast as possible.

"...I thought you ran for it." Ricardo sighed. He panicked when the alarm went off.

"As if I would." Martinez smiled wryly as he handed back the plastic pieces of the device and cord. "I'm sorry I had to break this. Give me a new one. You have a spare, right?"

Ricardo did have one. But it was apparent he did not need it. Ricardo shook his head. "I ran out of them."

Sixth Inning

Top of the Sixth Inning

According to Enokida's information, the Noma Group would be carrying out a drug deal on the second floor of a multistory parking lot in Nakasu an hour from now. Lin trusted his information, but when he had asked, 'how did you figure that out?' Enokida had answered with, 'I overheard it.' He must have put a listening device on someone again.

But at any rate, he learned where their target was. All that they needed to do was carry out the plan. They would attack them during the trade and take the products and the payment. Their method of attack would be similar to last time when they went after Kishihara, with two people riding motorcycles and do a hit-and-run. The method was regularly used by foreign mafias as well.

"Are you ready?" Lin addressed the other members as he put on his full-face helmet. "Let's go."

Each of the Chinese men nodded. The participants for this raid was four people in total, including Lin. They got onto two motorcycles and headed to their destination.

They saw three figures when they arrived to the second floor of the parking garage.

"Who are you!?"

The Chinese men held up their guns, rushing at the yakuza men while they were taken off guard. Then they aimed at one of the men and pulled the trigger. The man got shot in the head — an instant kill. There were two left. One hid behind the pillar. The other used a vehicle as a shield and was firing back at them.

Lin and his group counter attacked as they meandered their motorcycles to dodge the bullets. The other man ran out of bullets first. Up until then gunshots kept going off rapidly, but the place fell into silence almost immediately. One of the Chinese men had managed to shoot the yakuza member. The man was lying on the group, bleeding out. The other member of their group took the bills and drugs from him.

The last one was still behind the pillar.

"We know you're there. Come out."

The Chinese man spoke.

“Okay, okay.”

After a few moments, a man slowly came out from behind the pillar.

“I’m unarmed. Don’t shoot me.”

He was a huge, foreign man. Lin was taken aback when he saw the man’s face as he approached them in caution, hands raised.

“Mar!?”

It was a familiar face. It was his teammate, Martinez.

“That voice...is it you, Lin?” Martinez was also taken by surprise and closely examined Lin whose face was hidden beneath the helmet.

They got off the motorcycles and all of them cornered Martinez. Lin sternly ordered one of the Chinese men who were pointing a gun at him, “he’s my friend. Don’t shoot.”

He then turned back to Martinez and asked. “What the hell are you doing here?”

He did not expect to encounter a teammate under these circumstances.

“That’s what I meant to say.”

“I’m here for work. These guys hired me. What about you?”

“Same. Well, it’s similar to work anyway...” Martinez answered ambiguously. A car came flying in immediately after that.

It was abrupt, so everyone there was taken off guard. The car had clearly aimed for them. It was moving so fast it would have run them over. Lin and one other man were alright as they immediately dodged it, but the other two took a direct hit.

Lin returned to the mahjong club in Nakasu that acted as their hideout and reported the incident to the remaining group members.

“You’re by yourself? Where are the other three?”

Lin made a reluctant face when he answered. “They’re with the underground doctor.”

“An underground doctor? Were they injured?”

“Two of them got hit by a car. The other is accompanying them.”

They made a relieved expression when Lin told them this. Nonetheless, they were unsatisfied.

“We got the drugs and the money.” Lin added. He took out the case with the

fine white powder inside and the bills and slammed them onto the mahjong table.

They retrieved the money and drugs as instructed. They did interfere on the Noma Group's business deal in the end. Since they had achieved their objective, they could say their plan was a success.

However, two people got injured. They could not rejoice.

"Who was the driver of that vehicle?" One of the Chinese men asked.

"Don't know."

Lin cocked his head. He really did not know. He did not recognize the vehicle and was unable to examine what the driver looked like long enough at the time. Everything went into chaos when the sudden attack happened. Everyone was desperate to escape and lacked the sense of reasoning to check the plate number.

"Could that guy be...the Niwaka Samurai?"

Another Chinese man suggested fearfully as though mentioning a character from a ghost story.

"Yeah." Another man nodded in agreement. "It has to be the Niwaka Samurai's work."

"We'll all be killed by the Niwaka Samurai."

Lin raised his voice as the Chinese men began to panic. "No. It can't be him." That was not Banba. The Niwaka Samurai would not kill anyone in that manner. But the Chinese men refused to believe it. "We don't know for certain." "Yeah." "The Niwaka Samurai came to kill us." They all unanimously exclaimed. No. That was not him. Lin knew as he was close to the Niwaka Samurai, but he could not explain that to them. So instead, Lin chided back with a smirk. "What, so you're scared? You guys are pretty pathetic."

The Chinese men fell silent at Lin's provocation and scowled sullenly. They were unable to retort anything back as he had hit the mark. Though it could be inevitable to be afraid that the opposing organization had hired the hitman rumored to be the strongest in Fukuoka.

"...Then how about this." Another man spoke up. "How about you do something about him. You're a hitman."

"Yeah, sure. Fine by me." Lin nodded. He picked up the bills they stole from the Noma Group and waved them. "I'll take down the Niwaka Samurai for this

amount.”

Lin boasted and went to turn on his heel to leave.

“Wait.”

A Chinese man stopped him.

“What is it? You got a complaint about it?”

“This will be the advanced payment.” The man took half the bills from Lin. “The rest will be the reward for accomplishing the task.”

“...You guys are a stingy bunch.”

Lin tutted.



The Los Eses trio immediately began to carry out their plan. They contacted the Noma Group with the freelance dealer, Yakuin, as their mediator.

Uno took Treinta with him to the nightclub 10thousand in Nakasu. Once they got inside and stated their business to the bodyguards, they were brought to a private room on a bustling floor further inside.

A man was already awaiting for them there.

“You guys are acquaintances with Yakuin?”

The man was lying back against the sofa pompously. This man had to be Kishihara of the Noma Group. He had a small build, but he had a haughty attitude and he wore a gaudy suite, reminding Uno of Don Ramiro.

“Call me Uno.” Uno gave his name and pointed to the man next to him. “This is Treinta.”

“I’m Kishihara.” The other replied.

“Nice to meet you.”

They exchanged handshakes and sat down facing him.

There were a few men in black standing behind Kishihara. And there was also a tall man wearing a strange mask on his face.

“So what do you want?” Kishihara asked as he poured himself a drink. “I don’t like going about this a roundabout way. Just get to the point.”

Uno nodded in agreement and stated their business. “We would like to do business with you.”

“And?” Kishihara leaned forward and prompted them to continue. He seemed

interested.

“We usually do business in Mexico, but we are considering to broaden our horizons. We want to create a new route for us with this city as our base of operations. Having the Noma Group cooperate with us would be fairly beneficial.”

“Cooperate? What do you plan on us doing for you?”

“We would like to use your distribution routes throughout Japan. And of course, we will pay compensation for it.”

“...I see.”

Uno further explained. “I also heard you are on good terms with Japan’s police force. We would feel reassured to have you as an ally.”

Kishihara nodded. It was apparently true that he had connections in the police.

“And what are you planning to distribute?”

Uno replied. “We will deal anything. We have cocaine and heroin. But we are also considering on selling marijuana. We have the merchandise being brought over to Fukuoka soon. They are a high quality product from Australia, and they would sell a few thousand yen more than on the market.”

“Oh, that doesn’t sound bad.”

Uno broke the ice once Kishihara seemed to be onboard with the proposition.

“If you will team up with us, we will give you a meager gift.”

“A gift?”

“The Chinese dealer group the Noma Group is having a dispute with.”

Kishihara’s expression turned hard. “...What do you mean?”

“Those guys have been bothering us to give them the drugs, so we gave the Chinese men the products. But then when it came to putting their work to practice recently...you’re aware of this too, correct? We had no idea they were intruding on Noma Group’s territory. We no longer want to do business with them. We are considering to cut ties with them. We do not want to get involved in the conflict.”

Kishihara frowned with what Uno suggested next.

“But you can’t allow that, right? They would despise it. So here’s a proposition. We will propose a job for the Chinese men. We’ll tell them to come pick up the ten kilograms of marijuana we brought in. Which we do actually have. And then you can do whatever you want with them afterwards.”

“So you’re saying you’ll going to lure the Chinese brats out?”

“Exactly.” Uno smirked and asked. “You can torment them or kill them; however you please and then take the product back with you. Simple, right?” In this industry dealers were disposable. If they could form a business partnership with the Noma Group, then they had no need for the Chinese dealer group. Since they distributed drugs from Hongkong in Japan, they would have been business rivals anyway.

If they handed them over to the Noma Group, they could effectively get rid of the hindrance. So it was killing two birds with one stone.

Kishihara was not lacking in comprehending this. He consented, satisfied, “alright.”

Once they had finished negotiations with the Noma Group, Uno and Treinta left 10thousand. Uno made a call just as they exited an unpopulated alley. He called Ocho, the detached force.

“It went smoothly. How is it going on your end?”

After he had reported the end results of the negotiations with the Noma Group, Ocho replied back in a cheerful tone. ‘Yeah, it went great over here too. Those Chinese guys completely fell for it.’

Uno dropped the call and chuckled.

The plan was going swimmingly.

Bottom of the Sixth Inning

The spy Martinez could honestly care less about the sudden attack and the failure of the drug trade. He came out of it alive and the money that was stolen was not his to begin with. He did not receive any casualties.

He wanted to cut ties with the Noma Group if possible, but he could not. He was still kept under watch by Ricardo, so he had to continue the undercover investigation. If he had backed out without obtaining the drugs, there was the possibility his identity would be questioned by the Noma Group. He needed to file a complaint to the young head Kishihara on the sudden raid during the business deal as well as establish the next deal.

When he contacted Kishihara, he was told he was at the nightclub 10thousand for a business discussion at the moment. Martinez headed over to the club right away to meet with him.

The club was managed by someone associated with the Noma Group. Martinez

was brought to a private room for VIP usage further inside the club by his bodyguards. There were only Kishihara and a few of his lackeys in the room; Banba was absent. Martinez questioned as he looked around the room, “you don’t have that bodyguard with you today?”

“Bodyguard?” Kishihara cocked his head with a glass filled with brandy in one hand.

“You know, that guy wearing the weird mask.”

“Ahh,” Kishihara raised his voice in recognition. “He’s not a bodyguard. He’s a hitman.”

“Really?” He already knew that. “A hitman, huh.”

“He said he had an emergency, so he is away right now. Someone had called him.”

Martinez left the idle talk there and moved onto the main topic of interest. “... Still, we had a huge problem.”

He sat down on the black leather sofa across from Kishihara. He then leaned his large body against it.

“I heard what happened from my subordinates. You were attacked during the trade.”

Martinez and two other men happened to be present, and one of them died instantly with a shot to the head. The other got hit in a non-fatal area and had thus lived. Right now the lackey should be with an underground doctor, getting the bullet dislodged from his body.

“I nearly had been killed too.” Martinez purposefully sounded irritated. “The money and the goods got taken. What the hell was that?”

“The people who attacked you were probably the Chinese dealer group.”

“...Chinese? You mean friends of Zhou?” He recalled the Chinese man he had tortured.

“Yeah,” Kishihara nodded. “They plan to get revenge against us.”

If what Kishihara said was true, then Lin was employed by the Chinese group. So he was helping to extract revenge against the Noma Group, their opposing organization.

Wait, hold on, Martinez frowned.

The hitman the Noma Group hired is Banba.

God can go too far with pranks, Martinez sighed internally. *I can’t believe those*

two would be on opposite teams. I just hope nothing extreme comes out of this.
But more importantly, he had to focus on his own work right now.

“And I was hoping I could rack up some money finally. This is not what we had discussed. This is a huge loss.”

Give me back 300,000 yen, he glared. Kishihara smiled wryly.

“Come on, calm down. We’re going to completely annihilate those Chinese brats. They are unlikely to attack us again. I assure you.”

Kishihara then added.

“You’ll be able to earn back your 300,000 yen right away.”

“...What do you mean?”

Kishihara smirked when Martinez tilted his head in question.

“We’ll be able to extend our business from now on. Men from a Mexican cartel came by asking for us to team up.”

“A Mexican cartel?”

“Yeah. They seem to want to start doing business in Fukuoka.”

Drug cartels were advancing to Asia. Martinez recalled what Ricardo had told him earlier.

The DEA would want this information. Guess I should dig a little more.

“What kind of guys are they?” Martinez asked. “I have been in Mexico before. They may be someone I know.”

Kishihara shrugged uncertainty. “I don’t know who they are. I was introduced to them by a dealer I’m well-acquainted with. Two men had contacted me.”

“What are their names?”

“They said they were Uno and Treinta. One looked Japanese, but the other was Hispanic.”

“1 and 30? What the heck are those?”

They were the numbers for one and thirty in Spanish. *Those are ridiculous aliases,* Martinez laughed.

“They said they would give us a deal for ten kilograms of marijuana as a sign of friendship. We’re a bit short-handed, so I would like you to distribute it as well. You dealers are going to be put to work soon.”

“If there’s money in it, I’m fully onboard,” Martinez smiled at Kishihara’s request.

“So?” He asked nonchalantly. “When will their deal happen?”

“Tonight.”

“Tonight? This is on such short notice again.”

“Yeah, it is. We were told to come to Sunset Park on the pier at three in the morning.”

Sunset Park was a park facing the ocean on the Hakata pier. It did not have any playground equipment, but there was a brick promenade surrounding the park, so the local residents were fond of it as a place to jog or fish. The expansive site with palm trees growing around it would be used as a location for events on occasion, including music festivals.

“There is a monument that looks like a white castle in the park. We plan to meet with the people from the cartel there. Apparently they are getting their shipment dropped off there, so I’m having my subordinates go over there to retrieve it.”

“I see. So it’s going well.” Those words dropped from his lips fluidly but insincere.

He was secretly working to ensure their business deal would fail. The spy business is going under well, Martinez smiled bitterly internally.



Ricardo was waiting for him in a black van in a coin parking space a little away from the nightclub 10thousand. There was a small dent on the front side of the car. It was made from the person he hit back in the multistory parking garage earlier.

Martinez came back after he waited twenty minutes for him in the driver’s seat.

“How did it go?”

Martinez exclaimed after Ricardo asked him. “It was fruitful.”

He took a seat in the passenger’s side before adding onto his report.

“Members of a Mexican cartel came to Fukuoka.”

“What did you say?” Ricardo’s eyes widened and he leaned forward. “Which cartel?”

“I don’t know which.” Martinez smiled wryly. “According to Kishihara, two men named Uno and Treinta had contacted the Noma Group. They met up with Kishihara and proposed a deal.”

“Uno and Treinta...” That rang a bell for Ricardo. “...They can’t be from the Los Eses, could they?”

“Los Eses?” Martinez cocked his head. “Who are they?”

“They are an organization that formed after the Veracruz cartel were dismantled. Former members started it up in adoration of Ramiro Sanchez.”

The Veracruz Cartel. It was the organization Ricardo had infiltrated in nine years ago. It was brought down thanks to Don Ramiro’s right hand man Alex’s betrayal, and more than half of the executives were in jail presently.

“...I see. That’s why they are *eses*.” Martinez muttered with a sullen face.

The alphabet letter S was ‘ese’ in Spanish. Eses was the plural form.

“They assign numbers as their code name.” So the possibility of Uno and Treinta being members of the Los Eses were high. “The lower numbers are veterans.”

“That means this Uno guy has to be high up there.”

“Yeah. He must be one of the founding members.” Ricardo pressed for more information. “So what’s their objective?”

“Kishihara said they would split the marijuana with them. Those guys are smuggling them into Fukuoka.”

“Alright.” He could figure out their aim. “They plan to mainly run a marijuana business.”

“Marijuana, huh...” Martinez cocked his head, finding something strange.

“Shouldn’t they sell stimulants or narcotics if they are going to do business in Japan?”

“It’s not just Japan. They plan on distributing it everywhere from Fukuoka. There are countries that legalized marijuana, so producing it is simple.”

“Legalizing drugs? That’s insane.”

You’re telling me, he thought. Ricardo was surprisingly in complete agreement with him. “Marijuana is typically the gateway drug. It’s not as addictive compared to other drugs, but it’s not innocuous. There are plenty of marijuana addicts that commit crimes.”

And people were going to traffic that drug in large quantity in Fukuoka.

Los Eses was one of the organizations the DEA had an eye on. All the executives were wanted criminals.

As if I could let this opportunity go, Ricardo thought. “We’re going to capture the Los Eses members and confiscate the drugs. Get the time and date when

they're doing the trade."

"I already got it." Martinez replied proudly. "It will be at 3 am tonight. The location is at Sunset Park at Hakata Pier."

Ricardo glanced at his wrist watch. Right now it was eleven at night. They did not have much time before the deal.

"But what are we going to do?" Martinez asked. "You're not planning on doing anything stupid like barging in on the scene alone, are you?"

Regardless how few of them there were, the Los Eses members were from a brutal criminal organizations that engaged in armed conflict. It was unlikely they arrived in this city empty-handed. And they had members from the Noma Group with them currently. One person could not go up against them.

"I know."

But they only had a mere four hours until the trade. Even if Ricardo requested for backup from the DEA headquarters in his home country and had a jet dispatch, it would not arrive in time. The trade with the Los Eses would be over by the time his comrades would arrive. And even if Ricardo sought help from other agents residing in Tokyo or Osaka, it would be physically difficult for them to make it on time.

This left him with the option to either contact the NCD Fukuoka branch or the Fukuoka police OCD. The formalities to go through Japan's investigation facilities would be a struggle, so if possible he wanted to take care of this issue and transport the criminals to his home country behind-closed-doors, but he did not have any other choice.

"I'll request help from the Fukuoka police."

Ricardo stated and took out his cell phone from his pocket.

But as he did so, Martinez grabbed Ricardo by the wrist and shook his head.

"No, it'd be wise not to do that."

Ricardo frowned. "How come?"

"Kishihara from the Noma Group told me when he paid me earlier. 'This is cheap compared to paying the cops.'"

By paying the cops he meant bribing, Ricardo supposed.

"You mean to say there's someone helping the Noma Group within the police force?"

"Probably."

“This isn’t the Mexican City police.”

“There are corrupt police officers in every country. At any rate, if you request help from the police, the Los Eses will get that information via the Noma Group as well. They would postpone the trade and pull out, right?”

“Then what should I do?” Ricardo questioned in frustration. He grasped his head, tearing at his strands of hair.

He could not turn to the DEA or the Japanese police. All doors were closed to him.

“Then we just got to do what we can.”

Martinez answered plainly, but it would not be without hardship.

“There’s no way just the two of us could catch all of them.”

“We’ll manage.”

Martinez smirked.

Ricardo sighed at his optimistic remark. “Anything a Latin person says is unreliable.”

“Hey, you’re Latin American yourself.” Martinez shot back.

“Half of my blood is Japanese. And besides, I’m American.”

“You’re a *mexicoamericano*. You still got Latin blood in you.”

“It’s less than yours.”

“Ahh, is that what you think?”

They were not in a position to hold a meaningless argument. Ricardo returned to the issue at hand. “Do you have a plan?”

Martinez responded proudly.

“Yeah, leave it to me.”

Seventh Inning

Top of the Seventh Inning

Los Eses used one of the buildings in a warehouse in the center of a pier near Hakata pier as their hideout and drug storage facility. The factory appeared to have ceased running operations, with nails and metal pipe scrapes littered in the inactive space. There was a pile of cardboard boxes in the center that Uno and his comrades had carried in. Inside them were all illegal drugs.

The Los Eses trio each spent their time as leisurely as they pleased in their hideout. Treinta was doing weapon maintenance, sharpening a dull carving knife. Ocho was sitting on his guitar case, smoking a cigar to pass the time. Uno was in the middle of a phone conversation.

“I see. Understood. Then we’ll see you later.”

Ocho called out to him as he exhaled smoke once Uno dropped the call. “Who was it?”

“Kishihara.”

The recipient was Kishihara, the young head of the Noma Group that was one of their business partners.

“They made preparations for the raid. We’re going to carry out the deal as planned.”

“Good to hear.”

That was one issue resolved. Now they could proceed to the next step.

“Alright, let’s pack these up.” Uno glanced over to the cardboard boxes containing marijuana.

The Los Eses used the sea routes a lot to transport drugs as the Mexican port faced the sea. It was the same in Fukuoka, so they used the boat they purchased for that as well. The small fishing boat was only seven meters long that could fit seven people, and it could also be used to transport ten kilograms of marijuana.

Uno and his comrades put the marijuana they had stored onto the boat for transport.

“Should we really hand this over for such a cheap price?” Ocho expressed irresolutely as he carried the vinyl bags of cannabis. “This is ten kilograms, you

know? We could get 50,000,000 yen if we sold it under the normal price.”

“Don’t focus on the immediate profits, Ocho. This is just a sample. If no one gets a taste of it, they won’t know the quality of our products.”

They would not gain clients just by suddenly distributing marijuana worth a few thousand more yen onto the market. First they needed people to try it for a reasonable price so talk about their products would spread. Signal boosts were crucial to the drug dealing business. One taste of it and people would become addicted. And then more customers will seek their business. So this course of action was for that prior investment.

A few minutes later—

“This is everything.”

Ocho stated as he put the cardboard boxes onto the boat.

They finished putting the ten kilograms of marijuana and the guitar cases with their weapons onboard. Ocho sat down on the mooring post and took out a cigar to smoke.

All that was left to do was wait for the time for the deal. When the time drew close they would bring the products to Sunset Park and meet with the Chinese men. The members of the Noma Group will show up there and eliminate the Chinese group. Their hindrances would vanish and they would gain a new business partner.

There still had an hour before the trade off. Uno reclined back against the wall of the abandoned warehouse, deciding to take a short nap.



Lin sat on a park bench alone at night. It was near the Banba Detective Office, so they came to this park regularly to play catch. Normally children would be all over the place, but it was late into the night, leaving no one else but Lin present.

Lin had left a message on Banba’s cell phone, telling him to come to the park. After waiting on the bench for a couple of minutes, he heard the sound of an engine. Then he heard a man’s footsteps come closer.

“You’re here.”

Lin muttered and stood up from the bench.

He could see Banba, illuminated by the dim lighting from the street lamp. His mini cooper was left near the entrance of the park, and he was walking towards him. He still wore a suit but his Niwaka mask was absent. He carried a bat case over his shoulder, which probably contained his Japanese sword.

Banba asked with a chilling voice expressionlessly. "What do you want?"

Lin faced him and stated.

"I was asked to do something about the Niwaka Samurai. You're in the way."

Banba frowned slightly.

There was no way Banba would remain quiet and do as he asked. But naturally Lin could not kill a friend, regardless of the job he was tasked with. He would leave him in the office until everything was over. He would tie him up and confine him so he would not get in the way. He would just get roughed up a bit.

"Anyway, I'll spare your life."

Immediately afterwards, Lin moved. He took a heavy step forward and closed the distance between them. He got up right in front of Banba in an instant and swung his fist, aiming for his solar plexus to knock him unconscious.

But the attack did not reach. Banba blocked it with his hand. He spoke while still keeping his grip on Lin's fist. "I don't got time to play with you."

"Me neither."

Lin swung his other fist as he replied. He aimed for his face, causing Banba to raise his arms to guard himself. *He fell for it*, Lin smirked. His left swing was a fake. Lin went to strike him with his right fist into his now unguarded stomach. But just then, Lin's cell phone went off. He heard the Izayuke Wakataka theme begin to go off at roughly the same time. Banba's cell phone was ringing too. Lin was not the only one who got a call; Banba did too.

The two instantly stilled and took out their cellular devices.

"Who the hell is it!? I'm in the middle of something!"

Lin had accepted the call and shouted protests the moment he picked up.

'It's me.'

He heard the voice of one of the men from the Chinese group.

"What is it?" He replied back in irritation. I'm busy. Don't get in my way. "Tell me what you need in five seconds."

'We're heading over to Sunset Park now.'

"...Ha?"

Sunset Park? What's this about?

Lin's eyes were wide.

'We have a drug trade to do. Come with us.'

"Got it."

Lin answered curtly and dropped the call.

Banba finished his conversation at about the same time. Banba turned away from Lin once he hung up before attempting to leave.

"Hey, where are you going?"

Lin questioned with a sharp tone, stopping him.

"Sunset Park." Banba replied, still facing away from him.

"What?" That was a coincidence. "What are you going to Sunset Park for?"

"I ain't tellin' you."

Banba responded sharply.

The Chinese men said they had a drug deal there and called Lin to come along. And Banba, who was employed by Kishihara in the Noma Group, was called to Sunset Park at the same time he was. *What was the meaning behind this?*

Banba began to walk away as Lin pondered to himself.

"Hold it," Lin quickly called out to him. "I'm not done talking to you."

There was something he had to say to this man.

"There ain't nothin' to talk about."

Banba's demeanor was unnaturally curt. He must still be upset about the ball Lin threw out.

He's so stubborn. Lin was sullen. "What's up with your attitude? Don't sulk like a kid."

"I'm not sulkin'." Banba responded, still turned away from him.

"How long are you going to hold a grudge for? You're so stubborn."

"I don't got a grudge."

"Liar."

"I just don't wanna talk to someone who don't apologize for throwin' out people's things."

"So you do have a grudge against me!"

Lin shouted.

"But isn't it your fault for not cleaning up in the first place!?"

"Come on!" Banba briskly spun around. He yelled, pointing a finger at Lin's face.

“Dontcha put the blame on others! I hate that about you!”

“What did you say!?”

The two’s yells echoed in the quiet park at the dead of night.

“I’m not putting the blame on others; it was your fault to begin with!”

Lin refuted, unwilling to back down.

“If it was so important, don’t leave it in an open place to get thrown away!”

“I did!”

“Where!? You just left it on the desk!”

“It was a decoration!”

“Give it up already! I’ll give you a good one!”

“Go ahead and try! If you can that is!”

Lin lost it. He had reached his limit.

“You stubborn asshole!”

Lin shouted, unconcerned of the noise he was making to the neighbors, and went to punch Banba.

“That’s my line!”

The other made a counter attack. He held up his left fist just like him.

The next moment, their fists sunk into each other’s cheeks. They were strong blows. Both of them fell back from the force. Dizziness overcame them.

Lin and Banba both fell on their backs in the park simultaneously.

A sharp pain expanded from Lin’s head, and heat blossomed in his right cheek.

Lin gazed up at the expansive dark sky that was visible in his blurry vision. *The stars are so pretty today.* Just as that thought passed his mind, consciousness escaped him.

Bottom of the Seventh Inning

Martinez drove Ricardo’s van, and the two dropped by the outskirts of Fukuoka. An old building came into view as they drove down the two lane street.

“...Where are we?”

Ricardo questioned.

“We’re at a warehouse belonged to a yakuza gang called the Mutagawa Group.”

Martinez replied, his expression calm.

The Mutagawa Group. It was a familiar name. If Ricardo remembered right,

they were a gang that was rivals with the Noma Group.

“Why do you know this place?”

“A friend of mine had come here before. I heard about this place from him. The Mutagawa Group not only had drugs, but they also smuggled weapons. They have all their merchandise stored here.”

Once he parked the van in front of the warehouse, Martinez stated. “First, we get weapons. We can’t prevent the Los Eses’ trade if we go in unarmed.”

Martinez got out of the car, and Ricardo followed after. Martinez then went in through the back of the warehouse instead of the front.

“Do you have a gun?”

“Yeah,” Ricardo nodded. He had an automatic handgun that was supplied to him from the DEA in his holster.

“Let me borrow it,” Martinez held out his hand.

“What do you plan to do with it?”

Martinez did not answer his question and turned up Ricardo’s jacket, taking the gun.

“H-hey-”

The very next moment, Martinez shot the window of the storehouse. The glass shattered loudly.

Ricardo gawked. “You idiot! What the hell are you doing!?”

“Come on.”

After brushing aside the remaining shard fragments off the edge of the window, Martinez stepped up onto the window frame, intending to break inside. Ricardo reluctantly stepped inside the building.

It was a spacious warehouse. Cardboard boxes were stacked in piles, covering the walls. The boxes had handguns, rifles, grenades, and bullet proof vests. It was as if this was a military armory.

There were large spots of blood stains on the floor of the warehouse.

Something had happened here.

Martinez hefted up a box with handguns in it and ordered Ricardo. “Here, carry one too. Before the guys from the Mutagawa Group arrive.”

Ricardo sighed with an exasperated expression. “...Making an investigator steal?”

“They’re villains. They won’t report this, so relax.”

“That’s not the issue.”

Martinez snorted. “Come on, don’t be prudish now. Undercover agents have to be used to committing crime.”

Ricardo made a small sigh. “...Yeah, I suppose.”

He was right. He had done evil deeds numerous times while he was undercover in the cartel. He indulged in drugs with his comrades as to avoid suspicion as well. He had went deep into the criminal world, living day to day with criminals.

“...I occasionally forget who I am.”

He unintentionally spoke his true feelings.

Martinez turned still and glanced over to him.

Ricardo added quietly. “I feel like I forget I am an agent after being undercover for a long period of time. I become unsure whether I’m a good person or a bad person and which side I’m on.”

What if his true nature was no different than the people in the cartel? If provided the chance, perhaps he would fall down the path towards evil with ease. That uncertainty ate away at him regularly when he went undercover. He worried he would lose himself in his fake identity.

Ricardo shook his head. What he had expressed was pathetic sentiment.

“Forget it,” he told Martinez.

“Don’t think too hard on it.”

Martinez laughed back.

“*Viva la vida*,” he winked. “Let’s go all out and have a party.”

Ricardo slumped his shoulders. “...You damn Latino.”



They had obtained their weapons. Next was finding out the number of people. They had two members of Los Eses confirmed — Uno and Treinta — for the deal taking place in Fukuoka, as well as the Noma Group members that would be there to transport the ten kilograms of marijuana. So there would at least be seven to eight people. It was uneasy for just the two of them to break in. They needed backup.

Once they took the guns and bullet proof vests from the Mutagawa warehouse and put them in the van, Martinez contacted Banba and Lin. It would be a

tremendous help if those two assisted them. Martinez was certain their enemies would be no match for the infielders, regardless of how well they were accustomed to battle as a drug cartel dealer or the large number of members they had.

However, no matter how many times he called them neither of the two answered. The phone kept ringing for both of them. Perhaps they were busy at work. Banba was with the Noma Group, and Lin was employed under the Chinese group. Maybe they were unavailable at the moment.

With that option crossed out, Martinez thought up another plan. More than quality they needed quantity. They had to overpower their opponents with numbers.

After Martinez left the Mutagawa Group's armory, he and Ricardo headed towards Oyafukou. A few minutes of driving later, they arrived at a cheap, two story apartment building.

"...What's here?"

Ricardo questioned dubiously as he looked up at the old building.

"It's an apartment building geared towards foreigners. The landlord rents the place out to illegal immigrants for cheap. Ten people would live packed in together in the nine square meter rooms. I had also lived here some time ago. I mentioned that earlier, remember?"

Martinez had resided in this apartment for a period of time with other foreigners after he had obtained his new identity and landed in Fukuoka. Other fellow immigrants such as himself should still be living here.

Inside, they stood in front of the door to room 101.

"Rico, lend me your badge."

Martinez requested, but he was turned down. "Hell no."

"Why?"

"You're just going to use it to do something stupid, right?"

Ricardo glared. He was apparently still mad about him stealing his gun and firing it at the Mutagawa warehouse.

"Listen, just give it to me!"

"Ah, stop, you bastard!"

Martinez swiped his DEA ID that was on his waist belt and kicked down the door.

“Don’t move! We’re the police!”

Martinez yelled, breaking into the room. He held the gun he stole from the Mutagawa Group in his right hand and flashed Ricardo’s badge high into the air with the other.

The apartment’s residents were stunned at their abrupt arrival. There were foreigners from various backgrounds from Asians and Latinos to Middle Easterners, all of them flustered and their eyes darting about.

“You all will be arrested under suspicion of illegal immigration!” Martinez continued to shout.

Behind him, Ricardo was dumbfounded by Martinez’s eccentricities. His eyes were wide, questioning Martinez on his actions.

“Come on, copy me.”

When he whispered that to him in a small murmur, Ricardo reluctantly held up his gun like he did and ordered the foreigners, “put your hands in the air.”

The ten foreigners present in the room raised their hands obediently.

“Now then, gentlemen. Listen up.”

Martinez stated, gun still pointed towards them.

“You will be arrested and forcibly sent back to your own countries. You wouldn’t like that, now will you?”

The foreigners nodded fearfully.

“Alright then.” Martinez raised his voice. “We’ll consider granting amnesty to anyone who helps us in our investigation. We’ll turn a blind eye for overstaying in the country illegally and even pay for the trouble. So how about...100,000 yen per person?”

Their complexions changed at his suggestion. 100,000 yen was a lot of money for poor foreigners.

Realizing Martinez’s intentions, Ricardo gave him a questionable look, “are you sane?”

Martinez ignored him and pressed on.

“Anyone that’s willing to help out, get on your knees.”

All the foreigners did as he asked.

“Okay, good boys.”

Martinez made a toothy grin.

“We’ll supply you guns and bullet proof vests. You’re going to be investigators

for a day and assist us in our mission. But don't worry. The task is simple. You just have to act like one and surround the bad guys with your guns pointed at them from a distance. You don't have to shoot. And it'll all wrap up in a flash. So how about it? Easy, right?"

All the foreigners nodded earnestly.

"Hold on," Ricardo was the only one who objected. "You plan on using these guys?"

"Yeah, I am."

"You're kidding, right? They're amateurs."

"They'll be convenient for us since they're foreigners. If we write DEA with white pen on the bullet proof vests and have them wear them, they'll look like DEA agents."

Ricardo grasped his head, "you're going to do another puerile trick..."

He had Ricardo disguise himself as a hotel employee nine years ago, allowing him to escape safely. And now he was going to have these foreigners disguised as DEA agents. The plan should go well this time as well.

"Listen, Rico," Martinez explained his strategy. "You and I will approach the enemies. These guys will have guns and surround them from a distance. The cartel guys will believe they'll shoot if they resist, so they will submit to us willingly."

Ricardo scowled. "I can't believe you...Are you stupid?"

Martinez grew sullen when the best plan he had was spoke down upon. "What? Do you have any other ideas?"



"I don't." Ricardo replied in irritation. "But I can say for certain this plan isn't the most just out there."

"We can't afford to only take the just plans. That's part of life." Martinez stated firmly. "Stop your grumbling and prepare yourself for the worst."

They did not have time. They could not pull back now.

"...You look so pleased with yourself, damn you." Ricardo tutted, glancing

briefly at Martinez's face. "I hate that about you."

Eighth Inning

Top of the Eighth Inning

Uno and his comrades headed over to Hakata pier via the fishing ship when two a.m. rolled around. The Hakata bay was quiet this night, and the waves were calm. After a couple minutes of crossing the pitch black ocean at a slow pace, their destination on the pier came into view.

They anchored the boat once they arrived to Sunset Park. They moved from the sea to land, crossing over the small fence with the guitar cases in one hand. There were no signs of people in the park as expected at this hour. Only the silence greeted them. There was a futsal field near the park, but it was far past its business hours and thus was pitch black. Directly across from a multistory parking garage and the red tower, the Hakata Port Tower, was visible.

A white monument was at the corner of the park ahead of Uno. This was their rendezvous point. They still had an hour until the deal took place. Uno and Ocho went to set down the cargo. Uno stood on land and took the cardboard boxes Ocho handed him from the boat and set them along the promenade. Treinta was draped over the side of the boat, leaning over to spew his guts out. After a couple of minutes, Ocho suddenly stopped working and asked.

“...Hey, where did Treinta go?”

Treinta, who had been keeling over in the ship earlier, had vanished.

Uno pointed over to the portable toilet on the vessel with his chin. “He’s got to be in the lavatory, right?”

“He’s still throwing up? He needs to hurry up and help us.”

Ocho got off the boat as he muttered complaints when they suddenly heard a shout.

“Don’t move! We’re the DEA! Drop your weapons and put your hands in the air!”

Two men wielding guns rushed out in front of them. Both of them wore bullet proof vests which read DEA on them. They were American DEA agents.

“You guys are completely surrounded! If you resist, we’ll shoot to kill!” The agent yelled.

Uno examined the area around them. He could see men aiming handguns and

rifles at them from behind the palm trees growing around the park. At first glance, he could see around ten of them. They were surrounded.

“This is bad, Uno.” Ocho clicked his tongue next to him.

To escape this situation, they had no other choice other than to get back on the boat. However, these men were not the Japanese police, they were American agents. There was the possibility they would shoot them down mercilessly if they turned their backs to them.

They had to comply here. Uno raised both his hands in the position of surrender.

“Ocho, do as they say.”

Ocho reluctantly held up his hands as well.

The two men drew closer to handcuff them. The man who came up to Uno was a large black man with tattoos. He had a black tattoo which stood out on his arms. It had the letter S design.

Uno was startled to see it.

Uno knew full well what that tattoo was. It was proof of those close to the boss of the Veracruz cartel, Ramiro Sanchez. He had the exact same one on his own arm as well.

What’s the meaning of this? Uno cocked his head. *Why does a DEA agent have a cartel’s tattoo?*

Uno looked at the man. He had a large, dark-skinned body and a shaved head. He should not be anyone he knew, but he felt like he recognized his face from somewhere.

Digging through his memories, Uno had a realization. “Hold on, are you...Alex?”

Bottom of the Eighth Inning

“Hold on, are you...Alex?”

Martinez’s heart leapt in his chest when he was abruptly called by his old name the moment he went to handcuff the Los Eses member.

Now able to see him from closeup, Martinez finally realized who he was. It was a familiar face. He was the driver for Ramiro Sanchez back when he was part of the Veracruz Cartel. He was of Japanese descent, and he believed his name was Nakamura...no, was it Muranaka? Nakashima? Nakano? Nakai? ...Ah, it was Nagai. Nagai. Martinez remembered now.

But more importantly, this was a dire situation. Martinez tutted internally. He

did not expect to encounter someone he knew back when he was part of the cartel among the Los Eses. He was careless. Because of Martinez's betrayal nine years ago, most of the organization's executives he was closely associated with had been arrested, and as such he had mistakenly believed there was no one who knew his past in the rising cartels right now.

Since this man was no one important to the boss and was just his driver, he must have gotten off light with the police. He had no direct connection with the cartel business and conduct, so he would not have even been acquaintances with the undercover agent Ricardo, but Martinez had encountered him face-to-face on a multitude of occasions. He had accompanied Don Ramiro in the same vehicle this man drove. It was natural for this man to have recognized Martinez so easily.

If his true identity was found it, it would impede the plan. He had to play the fool.

"...Alex?" Martinez cocked his head. "Who's that? I think you've mistaken me for someone else."

"Don't play dumb."

The man retorted.

He declared, pointing at Martinez's arm. "That tattoo is proof that you've sworn loyalty to Don Ramiro. I have the exact same one."

As the man had stated, he could not deny the meaning behind the tattoo. Martinez decided to acknowledge it.

"Yeah, it is. When I went undercover, I had this made to deceive the dealers in the cartel."

He thought given the circumstances, it was a good excuse.

The other fell silent over the proclamation. His conviction that Martinez was Alex had weakened slightly. Martinez relaxed, believing he could escape the other's suspicion of him.

However—

"No, hold on."

Another man spoke up.

"I remember his face!" He pointed at Martinez's face and shouted. "He's Alex! This guy made a move on my partner in a Veracruz bar!"

Martinez grimaced. This man was a former Veracruz policeman? He must have

changed occupations to a drug dealer. It happened plenty of times.

“Hey, is that true?”

“I’m sure of it.” This man nodded and glared at Martinez. “You bastard, you raped my partner back then!”

“Like I said, that was completely consensual!”

Martinez realized his mistake immediately after shouting his response.

“...Ah.”

By the time he slapped a palm over his mouth, it was already too late.

Shit. I went and said that.

“So you really are Alex!” The two yelled simultaneously.

Ricardo was fuming next to him. “You dumbass!”

Martinez had carelessly revealed his identity. *This was not good.* Martinez frowned.

“As if a hitman from a cartel would become an investigator.” The former policeman grinned. “These guys are fakes.”

He turned to the fake investigators surrounding them and shouted.

“You guys over there, we’ll kill every last one of you! If you care for your lives, run right this very instant!”

In the next moment, all the fake investigators shrieked in alarm. They tossed down their weapons and fled in haste.

“Ah! Hey, don’t run!”

Martinez shouted to stop them, but they paid no heed. The foreigners vanished in mere moments, leaving only Martinez and Ricardo behind.

The Japanese man remarked in amazement. “You two are sure cowards despite claiming to be investigators. I mean you paid foreigners in the area to increase your numbers.”

They had completely seen through their plan.

“...You got us.”

Martinez muttered. Ricardo sighed next to him. “Why didn’t you wear long sleeves? You dumbass.”

But their opponents were also only two. They were even in numbers, but Martinez and Ricardo had guns. They still had the advantage. As long as they could capture these two, they could clear their mission.

“Still,” the Japanese man spoke. “It’s been awhile. Nine years, was it?”

It had been a while since they had last seen each other, but the man was everything but pleased about it. In fact, resentment could be detected in his tone of voice.

Of course he would be mad. This man had been dying on the side of the road when Don Ramiro found him and took him in as his driver. He would resent Martinez, who had betrayed Don Ramiro whom he had respect for, even nine years after the fact.

"I've missed you, Alex."

"Likewise, Nagai."

"...It's Ichihara."

He was completely off. "*Disculpa*, Ichihara."

"I don't really mind. I got rid of that name long ago. I'm Uno now."

Martinez had heard from Ricardo the members of Los Eses received code names in numeric order. "If you're Uno, you've sure made your way in the world then. Even though you were just Don Ramiro's driver."

"Now that," Uno deeply scowled. "is a thing of the past."

"This brings back memories. You were scared of me. You should shake every time I talked to you."

The frown Uno had deepened. "That is also a thing of the past."

"Is it now? Shall we test that then?" Martinez smirked provocatively. "...Just kidding. We don't have the time to play around. We have to capture you."

"What's your objective? You don't intent to snatch our merch from us, are you?"

"Yeah, we are," Martinez lied. "We heard there was a big trade going down, so we planned to steal the money and drugs by pretending to be investigators."

"What a poor plan."

"I thought so too." Ricardo nodded.

"Shut it," Martinez pouted.

"Anyway, we're going to take your captive now."

Martinez reached out to handcuff Uno.

"*No se muevan.*" (*Don't move*)

He abruptly heard Spanish from behind him.

When Martinez turned around, he saw a man wielding a rifle on the anchored boat. In that instant his attention was diverted Uno and the other man used the

opportunity to pull out their own guns.

They all stilled, guns pointed at one another.

“...You had another friend with you?”

Martinez tutted. He did not anticipate a third person. He must have hid on the boat and awaited a chance.

“Took your time, Treinta.” Uno said to the man.

There was only two of them. There were three opponents, and one had a rifle. There was a high chance they could get killed if they started a shoot out. They were at an overwhelmingly disadvantage.

“Drop your guns,” Uno ordered.

Martinez and Ricardo did as they were instructed, placing their guns onto the ground and raised their hands up into the air.

“Now the tables have turned.” Uno laughed. “You two are the captives now.”



This was the worst outcome.

Ricardo grimaced. Their plan fell through. They were one step away from succeeding, but then this idiot gave away his identity. Ricardo glared at the large man next to him.

Afterwards, Uno tasked one of his comrades to take care of the drugs and took Ricardo and Martinez onto the boat, in bounds. The place they were brought to was an abandoned warehouse near the pier, which must serve as the Los Eses' hideout and storage for their merchandise.

Ricardo's hands were tied together with rope. The end of the rope was fastened to a hook suspended from the ceiling, preventing mobility. Even when he attempted to struggle, he only succeeded in rattling the chain of the hook; he could not break free. His legs were tied neatly as well. Next to him, Martinez was in the same state as he was. Ricardo felt they resembled pigs in a slaughterhouse, but he was grateful they were not strung upside down.

Their bullet-proof vests had been removed as well, leaving them defenseless. All of their belongings including cell phones, wallets, and hand guns had been confiscated, and they were laid out on the ground.

“Hey Uno,” the man looking through Ricardo's personal items, Ocho, raised his

voice when he discovered his DEA ID. “This guy’s a real investigator.”

“What?”

Uno closely examined Ricardo’s face and muttered.

“So this guy must be the suspected undercover agent.” He then shifted his gaze over to Martinez and scoffed.

“From the CIA to the DEA? You’re so inconsistent.”

“I have a large strike zone.”

“It’s not good for even a dog to change masters so often.”

Uno picked up a metal pipe from off the ground and rested it over his shoulder. He then slowly drew close to Martinez.

“You betrayed Don, you filthy dog.” Uno glared, patting the tip of the metal pipe against Martinez’s chin.

“Will you bark for me? Huh? You shitty dog.”

“Woof, woof.”

The moment following Martinez’s snark response, Uno swung the metal pipe, striking Martinez in the gut.

Martinez slightly groaned and smiled wryly.

“...Why did you hit me? I barked just like you asked me to.”

“It’s because you always make fun of people!” Uno shouted in anger, veins bulging in his face. “I hate that about you!”

“The feeling’s mutual.” Ricardo murmured softly.

“You, the agent over there. We’re going to cut off your head and send it to the DEA’s HQ.”

Uno pointed at Ricardo before turning it back to Martinez. “And you’ll be sent back to Mexico. As a souvenir for Don Ramiro.”

“No Fukuoka souvenirs for one foul man? That’s pretty inconsiderate.” Martinez shrugged. “At least get him *torimon*.”

“Did you forget? Don Ramiro hates sweets.”

“That’s exactly why.”

Uno hit Martinez once more. This time the metal pipe struck him in his side, making Martinez grimace. “What was that for? That hurt.”

“You’re always joking around. It pisses me off.”

“You’re telling me.” Ricardo nodded.

He should just behave. *Why does this man always have to get the last line in?*

Ricardo was exasperated by him.

“I’ll use your head as a soccer ball and kick you around.”

“I’m more of the baseball type than soccer though.”

Uno yelled as he struck again with his metal pipe. “Then I’ll just! Have to beat you! Until you cease your meaningless comments!”

Martinez took another three, unrestrained hits and choked. He muttered as he grit his teeth, fighting against the pain, “*gaisi.*”

What did he say? Uno frowned.

“Uno, it’s about time. Let’s go.”

Ocho called out to Uno while looking at his wrist watch.

“...Damn.” Uno tutted and tossed down the metal pipe. “Alright.” He nodded and turned on his heel.

The two left the factory. As they did so, Uno turned around and pointed at them. “Just wait patiently until the deal is over. I’ll take good care of you later.”

“Looking forward to it.” Martinez smiled back.



“...”

When Lin awoke, he was sitting in the passenger’s seat. His gaze wandered, and a familiar setting came into focus. He was in a small car with a red body. It was Banba’s vehicle.

Huh? Lin cocked his head. *Why am I here?* He dug through his memories. *If I remember right, I had a brawl with Banba in the park...that’s right. Now I remember. I passed out after one punch.*

“...You’re awake.”

Lin heard a curt voice — it was Banba’s. He was in the driver’s seat, and his face was swollen red. They both collapsed at about the same time, but Banba was the first to regain consciousness. He was unable to leave Lin lying there unconscious and had reluctantly carried him here.

“Hm,” Banba coldly handed Lin a moist handkerchief. Lin took it obediently. His right cheek stung. Banba wanted to tell him to cool down the swelling with this. That was the greatest compromise this stubborn man was capable of.

All at once he felt everything dissipate. It was stupid to keep up this obstinance.

Lin, while keeping the handkerchief pressed to his right cheek, used his unoccupied hand to retrieve the ball from inside his pocket and handed it over to Banba.

“Here, you can have it back.”

Banba took it in hand, eyes wide in shock. “This is-”

“It didn’t get thrown away. It fell under the bed.”

Lin had planned to not return it until he had got an apology, but he did not care anymore. Now that he had calmed down, he had realized something. He was not just upset that Banba yelled at him for unknown reasons.

‘He’s got a lot of things on his plate.’ Lin had recalled what Genzo had told him at the food stall.

This man, who thought nothing but baseball, would hardly tell Lin anything about himself. It was the same in this moment as well. Banba made no attempt to explain what the dirty practice ball was and why he was mad. If he just did not want to say, Lin could understand. As such, Lin did not intend to force him to give information he did not want Lin to pry into.

Even so, Lin could not help but wish he would tell him.

Come on, am I not dependable? You still can’t trust me?

The abject thought dominated his mind.

“Take care of it next time.”

Lin spat back.

“...This here is-”

Banba had put the ball away in his pocket and went to say something when Lin’s cell phone went off. It was an incoming call. He got a call from Enokida.

Lin hit the button to accept the call and pressed the device to his ear.

‘I finally got a hold of you.’

He heard Enokida’s voice and a sigh of relief.

‘I called you numerous times.’

“Sorry, I was knocked out for a bit. Did something happen?”

‘Where are you right now?’

Lin looked outside the car. They had not changed locations.

“In front of the park near the office.”

‘Where’s Banba-san?’

“Next to me.”

‘Ahh, so you made up. Glad to hear it.’

That was not quite what happened. “What do you want?”

‘Go save Mar-san.’

“...What?”

Lin exclaimed, dumbfounded by Enokida’s sudden request.

‘Mar-san has gotten captured by the enemy. I have a bug on him equipped with a GPS, so I’ll guide you to where he is on the phone.’

Lin had no idea what had transpired, but he had to listen to him. “Drive,” Lin instructed Banba as he remained on the phone.

That reminded him. The Chinese men had called him. And Banba had been called by the Noma Group as well. However, it was 2:30 in the morning now. It seemed they would both neglect to head to Sunset Park as promised.



“...Ahh, shit. That bastard got five punches in.”

Martinez voiced next to him immediately after the two had left the abandoned factory. He cursed, unaffected by the relentless punches he received.

“Hey, what was that earlier?” Ricardo asked. The word Martinez said to Uno earlier was neither Japanese or Spanish. “Was it Chinese?”

“Yeah, it was.”

Martinez nodded.

“*Gaisi* means, ‘damn you.’ A Chinese friend of mine taught me that.”

He continued with his explanation proudly.

“By the way, *heigui* means ‘nigger,’ and *gaomizhe* means ‘whistleblower.’ But pronouncing Chinese is pretty hard. You know the roll of the R? How they do it is different than Spanish-”

“I don’t have the time to listen to your Chinese lesson.”

Ricardo interrupted Martinez from enjoying to talk at length before attempting to put strength in his arms. Despite shaking and pulling at his bounds, neither the chain or the rope yielded.

“We gotta do something quick...”

They had to get out of here before Uno and his friends came back. *Is there no good way out of this?* As Ricardo desperately put his mind to work, Martinez

remarked cheerfully. "Come on now. Don't struggle so much."

"Do you want to be made into a soccer ball?"

"I got a plan."

"What plan? Your plans have always been hit-or-miss." Ricardo snorted. "You Latinos live so carefree that you get into situations like this."

Martinez responded to Ricardo's string of complaints with a serious expression.

"I wasn't being carefree this time. They should be here soon."

The moment after he state that, the door opened.

Who could it be? Ricardo moved his gaze to the entrance. He thought Uno had returned, but it was not.

He saw a group of two people.

Martinez pointed at them with his chin and smirked, "told you."

The pair rushed over to them. One of them spoke to him. "Mar, are you okay?"

"Yeah," Martinez nodded and smiled. "I knew you'd come."

He then introduced the tall man holding a Japanese sword to Ricardo.

"Rico, this is Banba."

And after him, he glanced over to the other person. "And this is Lin. He's the Chinese friend I mentioned earlier. He dresses like a woman, but he's a man. Both of them are my teammates."

Banba and Lin used their weapons — a Japanese sword and a knife — to cut the rope binding Ricardo and Martinez. Once they were free, Ricardo picked up his belongings and asked while getting himself situated.

"What's going on? When did you call your friends?"

Martinez's hands were tied this whole time they were held captive. He should not have been able to call for help.

"I didn't. Our informant did for me."

"Informant?"

"Remember? He's the guy you met with me. The blond mushroom-head one."

When he heard that description, he vaguely remembered. There was a young man with gaudy hair accompanying Martinez when he had first tailed him.

"Back then he put a listening device in my clothes. He's a rascal who loves to eavesdrop." Martinez let a wry smile slip onto his face. "He noticed our dilemma and sent these two to get us."

In other words, this man knew his friends would come save him from the

beginning. That was why he kept joking around and provoking Uno: to stall for time.

However, Ricardo would have appreciated it if he had told him.

“Why didn’t you tell me something so important?”

Ricardo questioned him.

“I did just now.”

Martinez replied calmly.

Ricardo grew sullen and punched Martinez in the gut.



Martinez looked at Banba and Lin as he rubbed his beaten stomach.

“By the way, you guys.”

He looked them over and asked.

“What’s with your faces? Did you guys get the mumps?”

Lin and Banba both had their right cheeks swollen.

“Nope.” Lin spat out. “Drop it.”

“Well, a lot happened, you see.” Banba said ambiguously.

Martinez tilted his head to the side in curiosity but then his phone went off.

He accepted the call and pressed the device to his ear. “Who is it?”

“It’s the rascal who loves to eavesdrop.”

“Ahh, it’s you.”

The caller was Enokida.

‘Are you alright, Mar-san?’

Martinez smiled wryly. “Thanks to you.”

‘I didn’t think you had noticed I put the bug on you. Color me impressed.’

“It was just foresight. As if you wouldn’t try to poke your head into this.”

And so he had faith the other would act.

‘I made all the preparations for you.’

“You do a damn good job as always.” Martinez replied with a smile. “Leave the rest to me.”

He hung up and turned back to face Banba and Lin.

“Did you hear the situation from Enokida?”

“Yeah.” Lin nodded. “He said members from a Mexican cartel arrived in

Fukuoka.”

“Correct. They plan on carrying out their business here. At this rate, drugs will be distributed throughout Fukuoka City.”

“That ain’t good.”

If they let the cartel drug dealers do as they pleased, Fukuoka could eventually be a repeat of the drug war in Mexico. There would be shootouts, violence, and murder day in and day out, involving the innocent. The corrupt police, mass media, and politicians would be under the cartel’s thumb. They could not let those tragic events take place in this city.

“I won’t let them get away with it. I need your help.”

Lin and Banba nodded firmly to Martinez’s request.

“So what plan are we going to go with?”

Lin asked Martinez. Ricardo spoke up with a tired expression. “Don’t go along with his plans. They’ve all been hit or miss.”

“Don’t worry, Rico. We’ll be fine with these two around.”

Martinez proclaimed with pride. They should succeed with any plan they go with.

“The drug deal is going to take place at Sunset Park. The men from the Noma Group should be there by now as well.”

They should have enough people sent to carry ten kilograms of marijuana. On their team, they had four people. The enemy’s numbers would be much higher for certain.

However, they had two skilled hitmen. That should even the playing field.

“The Noma Group plans on eliminating the Chinese drug dealers.”

Lin’s eyes widened at Banba’s statement. “Are you serious?”

“I heard so from Kishihara. He said the fellas was gonna call them to Sunset Park and then kill ‘em. Since I ain’t there, his underlings will.”

“Then that’s convenient. Once the number of them decrease, we can attack them from the sea.”

Martinez picked up the bullet proof vests and metal pipe from off the ground.

“Let’s get going.” The others followed after him.

“If we’re going to come from the sea, how do you plan on getting there?”

Martinez answered as he put on his bullet proof vest. “Obviously we’re going to get there by ship.”

“Can you even operate a ship?” Ricardo asked.

“No.”

“Does someone have a license for it?”

Ricardo looked over to Lin and Banba.

“No.”

“I don’t got one.”

The both shook their head.

“Hey, let’s get on that.”

Martinez pointed to the small craft floating on the water.

“Hold on, that’s just a boat!”

“Come on, just get in.”

The four boarded the rowing boat, causing the vessel to reel.

“...We’ve got to be over maximum capacity for this, right?” Lin commented as he cut the rope holding the boat to the bit with a knife.

“I feel like this here’s gonna capsize.” Banba also frowned. “What are we gonna do if we go into the water?”

It was time to take off. Martinez took the oars in hand and rowed the boat with his monstrous strength. The boat slowly pushed forward through the pitch black ocean, rocking as it did. Would they reach the shore? Or would the boat sink? They were barely making it.

“Gosh it’s rockin’ like crazy.”

“Is this really alright?”

“You’re the heavyweight. Get off.” Ricardo told Martinez.

“Hey.” The boat was far from the shore. “As if I can get off now.”

“You can swim.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

Martinez went on with the rest of the battle plans within the small, rocking boat. “Listen. Our first objective is to arrest the Los Eses and to confiscate the marijuana. I don’t care about the Japanese guys, but don’t let the cartel members get away.”

“In other words, we can kill all of them, right?”

“Hold on, don’t.” Ricardo interjected without a moment’s delay. “You can’t murder anyone in front of me.”



Lin made a sullen face, but Martinez defended him, “he’s an investigator.”

“Then should we just knock them all out?”

“Do exactly that.”

After they rowed for a couple of minutes, a park facing the sea came into view — Sunset Park. There were around ten men gathered under the faintly lit street lamps. They were able to see Uno and his comrades as well.

“Look, they’re here.” Martinez spoke in a whisper and pointed at them. “It looks tense.”

Immediately after that, a shootout began. The Noma Group surrounded the Chinese group and shot them down. A fishing boat was anchored nearby. They drew close to it during the commotion and came alongside the pier, hiding in the boat’s blind spot.

“Alright then. It’s time to switch offense and defense.”

Martinez gripped the metal pipe and smirked.

Ninth Inning

Top of the Ninth Inning

There was a white monument with a bronze bird statue perched on top of it located in the corner of Sunset Park. Uno anchored the fishing ship nearby there, tying the rope to the bit. They met up with Treinta and sat down on their guitar cases which held their weapons as they waited for the others to arrive. There was an L shape promenade surrounding the park, as though encasing it. They were currently stationed at the bend section of the L shape.

As the time drew near, the Chinese men arrived. Immediately following them, a large crowd of men from the Noma Group came out, surrounding them on all sides. The Chinese group had fallen for the trap.

The Noma Group was merciless. They mowed down the Chinese men while they were taken off guard, quickly creating piles of bodies in their wake.

“Ahh, what a great night.”

Uno remarked as he looked at the bodies sprawled out on the ground.

“Today is going to be a historic one.”

Two organizations of different nationalities — the Los Eses and the Noma Group — would come together and form a partnership. It will be the birth of the Fukuoka cartel.

“Hurry up and give us the stuff.”

One of the Noma Group’s men prompted him.

“Don’t be so hasty. We’ve got it all ready for you.”

Uno signaled to his comrade. Ocho nodded in turn and took off the vinyl sheet covering the product.

“Here you go, as promised.”

10 kilograms of marijuana were revealed from underneath the sheets, laid out on the brick promenade.

The men’s eyes turned bright when they saw it.

“Could we try some?”

“Go ahead.”

Uno tossed over a small vinyl bag.

The man opened the bag, took out the contents and burned it with a lighter. He

sucked in the scent through his nose, an ecstatic expression forming on his face.
“...This is good stuff.”

“It’s high quality marijuana from Australia. I’m confident in its quality.”

Uno emphasized its production. One gram of was worth around 8000 yen and was much more expensive than the average kind, but he knew it would sell in mass.

“We’ll give you the ten kilograms as promised for half off. Sell it to your clients at a lower price so they can test it. We would like rumors of our product to spread around.”

Uno picked up another bag containing marijuana in it and went to give it to the men.

“...Hey, what’s that?”

One of the Noma Group men looked over to the pitch black sea and pointed.

“Someone’s here!” The man yelled.

Uno turned around. In that moment two figures had leapt over the fence dividing the land and sea. One wore a suit and held a long object — a Japanese sword. The other seemed to be a woman. She held a knife in her hand.

“Who are these guys?” Uno stepped back to gain distance from the duo and tried to regain his composure. Uno backstepped, distancing himself from the pair and watched the scene in a daze.

The duo instigated a fight with the Noma Group members. They weaved through the men swiftly and struck them on their heads and stomachs.

Everyone fell into a panic at the unexpected development. They did not have the time to retaliate, and before they knew it everyone but Uno and his comrades were beaten down by the pair. The unconscious Japanese men were collapsed on top of the Chinese men’s bodies.

The duo then turned to them. *This is not good. Shit*, Uno tutted. *Everyone is getting in our way.*

The trade was cancelled.

“Ocho! Treinta!”

Uno shouted for his comrades and pointed at the enemies.

“Keep these guys at bay! I’ll get the merch!”

The ten kilograms of high quality marijuana were still left out on the promenade. The total price for them was around 80,000,000, and their street

price was several hundred million yen — too important to let it go to waste. It was not a question to simply leave them behind here.

“Got it!”

Ocho nodded and dashed off with his guitar case in hand. Treinta seemed to have understood Uno’s order and also took off. Ocho took to the right and Treinta the left. The two enemies split up and went after one of them each. Meanwhile, Uno rushed to get the marijuana on the ship. He tossed the bags over onto the deck from the shore. As he picked up the next bag, a voice called out to him.

“Stop right there.”

Uno froze. When he cocked his head back, a man stood there, holding up a gun. Uno’s eyes widened when he saw the man’s face. It was the DEA agent they had captured earlier.

“You could’ve just run for it, but you just had to be greedy.” The agent scorned. Uno swore under his breath. *How did he escape? Don’t tell me those other two are with them?*

The agent took out handcuffs with one hand while still holding the gun towards him. “I’ll throw you in the same jail as your beloved Don Ramiro.”

It was a horrible situation. Uno pondered over how to get out of this. But he did not have the time to do so. He had to run. He could not allow himself to get caught.

Fortunately, there was only one man. He could break away.

Uno threw the bag he held at the agent. He spun around as the other was distracted and quickly bolted over the fence. He dived on top of the marijuana bags as a cushion, rolling into a landing.

“Hey, hold it!”

The agent yelled from behind him. Soon after, there was a gunshot. The agent was leaning over the fence and firing at him. Uno cut the rope tied to the bit and rushed over to the pilothouse while staying low to avoid the bullets. He started the ship, and it slowly took off into the sea.

After a few minutes, Uno sighed in relief. Having covered this much distance, the bullets should not reach. Uno was unable to retrieve all the products, but he was able to save himself. The remaining issue was Ocho and Treinta. He hoped they were alright.

Uno took out his cell phone once he was a fair distance from the shore and called an acquaintance of his.

The other picked up immediately. 'What is it?'

"Listen. We're in trouble."

'What happened?'

"The agent you spoke of attacked us during the drug deal."

'What?' The man raised his voice in alarm. 'What's your situation right now?'

"I got the merchandise on the ship and got away. But I don't know about the other two."

'Don't worry. Even in the chance he does catch them, I'll work it out.'

Uno nodded. "You better. I paid you a lot of money for it."

'Yeah. I'll be heading over there right away.'

Uno took the wheel once more after dropping the call. But just then—

"Stop the ship, Uno."

There was a sudden voice, causing Uno to whip around. A large man holding a metal pipe stood behind him.

"...Alex."

Uno muttered the man's name and scowled. "You again?"



As they had planned, Martinez and Ricardo hid on the boat and watched the scene unfold as the hitman duo cleaned up the Noma Group members. Their plan was to capture them just before they got on the ship, anticipating the Los Eses members would try to flee via the sea. But they did not expect two of the Los Eses members to be left behind as bait and Uno was the only one to try and escape with the merchandise.

"Don't be in such a rush, Uno. You're wasting the cruise away. You should take your time and enjoy the night scenery more."

"...You bastard." Uno asked questioningly, glaring at Martinez. "When did you get on my ship?"

"I had been hiding away in the toilet while you were putting the marijuana on board. I knew you would try and escape by using the ship."

That was a lie. The truth was Martinez could not hold his bladder while they

were waiting, and Ricardo scolded him when he tried to go in the ocean, so he had went to the porta-potty on the fishing ship the Los Eses had. But since the real reason was uncool, he went with something else.

It was a miscalculation on his part that Ricardo would let Uno escape while he was in the restroom, but it was a fortune in disguise that he was on the ship. Now with the circumstances as they were, he had to capture this man right here and now.

“Who knew you’d leave those two behind as bait and only you would make a run for it. Is the damn plant more important than your friends’ lives?”

Uno frowned. “You should know more than anyone, right? In our world, the value of drugs is more important than people’s lives.”

“I don’t care how things are run in your world.” Martinez retorted in a solemn voice. “Get the hell out of my city.”

He swung the metal pipe, aiming for the other’s head, but Uno took the opportunity to sharply turn the wheel right.

“Whoa!?”

The ship terribly shook, causing Martinez to stumble. He lost his balance, and his back collided against the side of the boat. The metal pipe fell out of his grip and rolled across the deck.

Martinez tutted and glared at the other man. “Shit, you serious?”

Uno stopped the ship. He then pulled out a gun and pointed it at Martinez.

“Alright, I get it. I give in.” Martinez shrugged and raised both of his hands.

However, Uno did not stop.

“I never imagined this scenario even in my dreams. That there would be a day I could kill you, the traitor, with my own hands.”

He placed his finger on the trigger and went to take a shot.

“Die, Alex.”

Martinez thought he was going to die. Uno despised him. He truly intended to kill him. Martinez braced himself.

Immediately after, a gunshot went off.

However, Uno did not make it. Martinez was not shot.

Someone else had fired before Uno did. The bullet struck Uno in the center of his right hand, blowing the gun out of his hand.

“Hold up your hands.”

A voice ordered. When they turned around, they saw Ricardo.

Martinez's eyes were wide. *When did he get on this ship?*

"You again!?"

Uno shouted and went to pick up his gun. However, they could not let him.

Martinez swiftly grabbed the metal pipe and struck it against Uno's head.

"Urgh." Uno groaned before collapsing onto the deck.

"...He's not dead, is he?"

Ricardo looked down on his body that was splayed out like a corpse, eyebrows furrowed.

"I held back."

He pressed his fingers against his pulse point. Uno was alive. He was just unconscious.

"Damn, what the hell were you doing...?" Ricardo's breathing was ragged.

"Who'd go up against someone with a gun with just a metal pipe. ...Do you not value your own life? You damn idiot."

Ricardo was exhausted. Martinez pieced together the reason why quickly. He pointed towards the ocean. "Did you come all the way here on that?"

The paddle boat was left right beside the fishing boat. Ricardo had gotten on it and pursued after the ship with it. The distance from Sunset Park to the ship was roughly three to four meters. Martinez broke into a smile, imagining Ricardo paddling the boat in haste.

As Martinez tried to suppress himself from smirking, Ricardo cuffed Uno and stated. "That's one down. There're just two left."

The other Los Eses members were up against Banba and Lin. "We can leave it up to those two." Martinez replied cheerfully.



"What the hell is this? Goddammit!"

Ocho swore as he ran down the promenade, guitar case in hand. He could hear footsteps approaching him from a few meters behind. The male of the duo who showed up out of the blue went after Ocho. Ocho kept running, turning back multiple times to fire sporadically. He tossed the gun away when he eventually ran out of bullets.

A red steel tower could be seen ahead — it was the Hakata Port Tower. A futsal was located in front of it.

An idea passed Ocho's mind. He had his beloved rifle, an AK-47, inside this guitar case. If he could lure the enemy into the spacious futsal, then he would be unable to run or take cover. Ocho thought that would be his best chance. He stepped inside the unpopulated futsal. He opened up the metal latching of his guitar case in the center of the court. His eyes widened when he opened the lid. His rifle was not inside; there were knives. Numerous kinds of blades were packed inside from small survival knives and kukri knives to machete knives. I got the wrong one.

"Shit!" Ocho swore.

These were Treinta's weapons. He was a knife maniac and hardly used guns. He always fought barehanded or with knives. They were in a rush, so Ocho had accidentally grabbed Treinta's gear. Ocho cursed under his breath once more. The man arrived at the entrance of the futsal while he had his dilemma. Ocho was blocked in, surrounded by a fence on all sides. He had nowhere to run to. Although he had planned to lure his opponent in here, he ended up being chased into a corner instead.

Now that it's come to this, I have no other choice.

Ocho took out the largest blade from the pile. He gripped the machete with a thirty centimeter blade and held it up.

"I'll cut off your head and kick it around as a ball."

Ocho pointed the tip of the blade towards his enemy and grinned.

The man held a Japanese sword. He unsheathed it as he slowly drew closer.

Ocho made the first move. "Yah!" He shouted and lunged at his enemy. He swung the machete, aiming to slice at the man's body.

The man blocked Ocho's attack with his Japanese sword, taking a step back while pressing against the machete's blade. Metallic clangs echoed throughout the silent court in succession.

I got this. Ocho was holding the man back. He could overcome him.

He swung wooden handle around, forcing the man back until he was pressed against the fence. Their blades exchanged blows, blocking each other's attacks. In that moment, Ocho applied more strength and pressed into him. The man had no place to run to. The man's head was pressed between the fence and the

machete. And the Japanese blade was mere inches from cutting into his own throat.

The man also added more strength behind his Japanese sword to push back Ocho's blade.

"Hey, tell me." Ocho spoke to the man while they were in a stalemate. "Are you a friend of Alex?"

The man tilted his head at his question. "...Alex?"

The man could be going by an alias now. "The Dominican." Ocho clarified, and the man seemed to recognize who he was referring to.

"I'll warn you. That guy is a cowardly traitor."

Ocho drew close to the man's face and smirked. There was no meaning in warning him; this man was going to die.

"I bet he'll betray you too in a matter of time! After all, Alex is just a fag with no balls--"

He was unable to finish what he was going to say.

Abruptly, there was a pain on his face. In the same moment, Ocho was roughly pushed back and he collapsed onto the court with a yelp.

Heat blossomed in his cheek. He had been punched.

"Y-you bastard! How dare you!"

Ocho quickly stood back up and swung the machete, furious.

He had underestimated him. He had been so focused on the Japanese sword that he did not expect the man to punch him.

The man blocked the machete with his Japanese sword and quickly shifted to his left side. This caused Ocho to lose his balance and fall forward. His opponent used the opportunity to hit the weapon out of his hand, causing the machete to tumble onto the ground.

The man threw more punches at the unarmed Ocho. He punched Ocho in the face, the side, and the stomach. Ocho fell against the fence, shaking.

"...Tryin' to be all talk ain't good."

The man muttered. He reached out with his right hand and gripped Ocho by his collar. The man's eyes were livid.

"Ah, gah."

Ocho was unable to speak from being choked.

"I'll give ya a warnin' as well."

The man strengthened his hold on Ocho's throat and stated in a low voice.

"Next time you badmouth my friend...I'll kill ya."

Ocho shook upon hearing the man's voice dripping in killing intent and seeing his expression which gave him goosebumps.

With pressure on his carotid arteries, his vision began to blur.

In the end, I never got to have Japanese food.

The thought passed through his dimming mind.



Two unknown men had attacked them during their deal with the Noma Group. The drugs were of more importance than people's lives. They had to buy enough time for Uno to move the marijuana onto the ship.

Treinta ran off in the opposite direction as Ocho before he stopped at the end of the promenade. Behind him were open freight storages filled with containers and the night scenery of the factories located on the opposite side of the shore. Treinta decided to face his enemy in this place, surrounded by the port-like scenery.

There was the click of heels, indicating the enemy was drawing near. It was the woman who had followed him. They had a small build and long hair as typical of any ordinary woman, aside from the knife they held in their right hand.

However, whether the person was a man or a woman did not matter; it did not change that they were an enemy. What Treinta had to do was the same. He had no intention of holding back or being merciful. They would inevitably battle soon enough.

"You're a member of the Los Eses, right?"

The woman spoke, but unfortunately Treinta did not understand Japanese. He was only able to make out Los Eses. He observed the person's movements in silence.

The other hummed to themselves in thought when Treinta showed no signs of recognition.

"If you're from Mexico, then you speak Spanish, right? I learned it back when I was in the establishment, but I haven't had any opportunities to use it and don't remember much of it."

They then held up their left hand and began to speak in broken Spanish.

"Hello...That's not it. Umm, hola? ¿Como estas?"

"Muy bien. Gracias."

The other nodded, pleased, when Treinta answered him. They must be happy to have conversed with him.

They then added.

"Soy, Lin. Encantado. Te, mato, ahora."

Treinta frowned when the other gave an absurd greeting to him and stiffened. He held up his fists, taking a fighting stance.

"Seems you understood."

The enemy smirked.

It was the other who made the first move. They attacked him, the tip of the blade fixated on him. They were small, but they were nimble. They were extremely swift on their feet. They slipped right up to Treinta and thrust their knife forward, aiming at his stomach.

Treinta did not move an inch, taking the attack head on. He grabbed the arm holding the knife and pulled them forward, using the momentum to easily make them fall. At the same time, he bent the arm back, making the tip of the knife face their body. Adding pressure and pushing further, he thrust the blade into their side.

"Ow-"

The enemy's face contorted in pain. The knife only went in by about a centimeter or two. It was not life threatening. The other must have realized their intention as they pulled back. Treinta was surprised they were able to dodge the knife from the difficult position they were in. They were accustomed to fighting and were pliable. They were not just any ordinary person.

But Treinta did not miscalculate. He assumed they could escape, so he made a fist with his open hand and struck them in the temple. He then hit them in vital areas including the throat, solar plexus, and ribs. The enemy groaned and sputtered.

Just as Treinta swung his right fist to deliver another blow to their face, a sharp pain shot through his arm. When he examined it, he saw a cut had been made on his forearm and blood was seeping from it.

The enemy had removed the knife from his side while Treinta was beating him

and kept it concealed, waiting for the opportunity to strike back. His life was spared thanks to the moment he noticed the pain.

Treinta took out his hidden weapon. It was a folded carving knife. It was not lethal, but the slim blade was sharp and he could do a lot of damage depending on how well he wielded it. The other was unsteady on their feet, disoriented from the blow to the head.

Treinta made another maneuver. The enemy flicked the knife around, making several slashes at him and closing the distance between them. Treinta warded off the enemy's knife by slapping the hand holding the weapon with their right hand. The moment the attacks ceased, he grabbed the other's wrist with his open hand. He held onto them so they could not move and stabbed them with the needle-thin tip of the carving knife.

"Urgh, agh..."

The other gave a voiceless scream.

There was a large nerve that ran from a person's shoulder to their arm. If he hit them in the central point, the elbow, they would suffer unbearable pain. It was one vital on the human body, which was used often in torture.

The enemy's hand loosened, letting the knife fall from their grasp. Treinta grabbed the enemy's other arm as he seethed in pain and mercilessly stabbed him with a knife in that elbow as well.

"Ah, gah...Ahh, shit."

They collapsed against the ground and turned limp, falling unconscious. He could no longer hold the knife.

Treinta struck his enemy in the face, torso and arms in succession. They would lose their fighting spirit after this much pain. Their body and mind would not do as they liked.

"Ya no podrás moverte con ese dolor." (You can't move anymore with this much pain).

Treinta looked down on the small body, curled up and the ground and trembling, with cold eyes. There was not a single person who dealt this much damage and fought back. This was the end for them.

"Ahora te haré sentir mejor." (I'll put you out of your misery).

Treinta reached for the other's neck to strangle them when the man's face, which was contorted in pain, softened. And then the edges of his lips curled

upward.

Treinta's eyes widened, stunned to see his expression.

This guy is smiling?

Bottom of the Ninth Inning He was resistant to pain. He was trained to be so. However, the pain he received was of another caliber.

Shit, I can't move.

Lin grimaced.

All the man's attacks landed on him. Lin's pain stricken body would not listen to him. His head was swimming from the blow to the temple. Just breathing caused his ribs to throb. A few of them might have gotten damaged.

And he also could not move his arms. He got hit in the nerve. Because of the pain, he could not find any strength. He could not grip the knife. He could not fight or run away. The enemy was slowly approaching him.

Shit, Lin clicked his tongue. I'm going to be in deeper shit at this rate.

He had to break out of this situation. Lin's attention was caught by something at the end of his vision — it was a small bottle.

He recognized it. Now thinking about it, he recalled receiving it from the Chinese group to stop the pain. He had put it in his pocket, but it must have fallen out during combat.

They said the contents of the bottle were a new type of morphine. Morphine had the effects to disseminate the pain by restricting pain signals from reaching the brain. However, a side effect was also decreasing mobility. If he used it, he would not be able to fight long. But as circumstances stood now, he would just be killed without being able to put up a fight. He had to settle this with one attack.

Lin grit his teeth and grabbed the bottle, opening the lid with his front teeth. He swallowed the drug, curling in on himself so the other could not see what he was doing.

His head started to clear right away. The pain in his body began to lessen. The effects were immediate.

"Ahora te haré sentir mejor."

He heard a voice nearby. The man was closing in on him.

Lin moved just as his hand reached out to grab him. He took the knife in hand and stabbed at the man's body. But he missed his target. Lin swore under his

breath. The man was bleeding from the thigh. Lin intended to stab him in the stomach, but the man evaded the attack.

The man yelled in pain. He stepped back, stumbling over his feet.

As if I'd let you get away, you bastard.

Lin was instructed to bring them in alive, but he could care less. He was a hitman. Besides, if he does not kill the man, he would be killed instead. Lin pulled the trigger on his knife-pistol, aiming for a vital spot.

The moment the gunshot went off, there was a groan and the man collapsed in a heap. Lin had aimed for his heart, but his vision was blurry from the drugs, making him miss once more. Blood gushed out of the man's stomach.

Lin stood up unsteadily.

"Ahh, damn...A hangover is a better alternative to this..."

As expected of an opium drug. Lin almost felt like he was drunk. He walked over to the man with uncertain steps. The enemy was heavily breathing. Lin had missed his vitals, so the man would not die. Lin struck the butt of the knife against the man's skull, knocking him on unconscious.

It was a tough fight, but it was over. All that was left to do was to bring this man to Martinez and Ricardo.

Lin grabbed the man's legs and tried to drag him.

"...Damn, he's heavy."

He could not do it. In his current state, he could not carry one person. He had to call for help. He turned on his heel, considering to ask Martinez.

Lin left the man behind and returned to Sunset Park. The unconscious yakuza men and the dead Chinese men were still there, laying on the ground.

Lin looked around the area for Martinez.

"Lin!"

Just then, he heard someone shouting his name — it was Banba's voice.



"...Jeez."

Banba sighed, looking down at the Mexican sprawled out on the ground.

"I might've went too far."

He could not sit still when the man spoke ill of his friend, calling him a 'coward'

and a 'fag.' He could not stop himself he was so outraged. Banba contemplated on how he had beaten down this man without restraint a little.

He picked up the man's limp body and exited the futsal field. He walked down the promenade alongside the sea. After walking for a few minutes, the white monument of Sunset Park came into view. Someone was standing nearby it. It was a tall man. From his backside, he did not look like Lin, Martinez or Ricardo. He was likely a member of the Noma Group. It was the man Banba took down. Banba had meant to knock him out, but he had woke up at some point.

When Banba examined him closer, he saw the man was holding a gun. The man's gaze was focused on Lin.

Banba's breath catches in his throat, and he dropped the man he had been carrying.

"Lin!"

Banba shouted.

Lin turned around, responding to his voice.

The man from the Noma Group shouted. "Die!"

Noticing the man about to pull the trigger on him, Lin's eyes widened in shock.



By the time he turned around in response to Banba's shout, it was already too late. A man who should have been unconscious had stood up and pointed a gun at him.

Normally, Lin would be able to react accordingly. He would be able to dodge his enemy's attack and counterattack as well. But Lin could not move due to the drug. The side effect of the the pain killer he took lessened the pain but also dulled his perception. He could do nothing but watch the scene fold out in a daze.

Banba took action in place of the immobile Lin. Banba, behind the man by several meters, swung his right arm. He seemed to have thrown something. A white object came flying and struck the man in the back of the head. The man collapsed from the impact, falling unconscious once again.

What Banba threw was the hard baseball. It bounced off the man's head and plopped into the ocean.

“Ah!”

Lin shouted, turning towards the sea.

“H-hey! Just now that was your ball!”

Lin rushed over to Banba who replied calmly, “yeah, it sure was.”

Lin was dumbfounded. *What ‘yeah, it sure was!?’ What was he doing!?*

“Wasn’t that important to you!?”

Lin pressured him. Banba smiled wryly in response, “well, yeah. That was a homerun ball.”

“...A homerun ball?”

“Yeah,” he nodded before adding. “When a player makes a homerun in a baseball game, the audience catches it, right?”

“...Oh, that?” Now that he mentioned it, Lin had seen it on live baseball matches often. He recalled the audience members scrambling over it.

“When I was a youngin’ , I went with my family to a baseball game. In that game, the fourth batter — a foreigner — had hit a homerun. And it was a game-endin’ home run. The ball came flyin’ over to us, and my dad caught it.” Banba glanced over to the sea. “That was the ball. My dad gave it to me.”

Banba had a gentle smile, lost in nostalgia.

Lin was got the gist of it from his expression. It was likely his father was no longer in this world. And that dirty ball was Banba’s most treasured relic of his father.

Lin did not know. He did not expect it held that much importance. The area was dark so it was difficult to find where the ball had fallen, but it had just landed in the water. It should still be floating in the ocean. Lin might still be able to find it. He had to find it before it sunk beneath the surface.

Lin leaned over the fence and gazed at the ocean. He squinted, searching for the ball.

“It’s fine.”

Banba lightly patted Lin’s shoulder and shook his head. Just as he had expressed, there was no lingering affection dedicated in his voice towards it and he had a cheerful expression.

“I can just go get another homerun ball.”

Lin could not relent since Banba had told him that so indifferently. Lin treasured his memories of his family. Even now, he kept the photo of his mother and

sister on his person. As such, he knew how painfully important that practice ball was to Banba.

“...I’m sorry.”

The words naturally fell from his lips.

If Lin had not thrown out the ball back then, Banba would not have lost the relic. If he had noticed the enemy’s attack earlier and reacted in time, the ball would still be in Banba’s pocket.

It’s my fault, Lin lamented.

“Dontcha fret about it, Lin-chan.”

Banba gave Lin, whose face was clouded over in horror and shoulders slumped, a smile.

“But it was a precious memory to you, right?”

“Objects ain’t memories.”

Banba gently smiled, reminiscing the past.

‘He’s got a lot of things on his plate. And he remains silent ‘bout them lots of things so you don’t get wound up in them.’

Lin recalled what Genzo told him back then and more or less understood. Banba was afraid to turn to his friends about his past. So he never talked about himself. If he did, then they would be get dragged into it.

But what was wrong with that? I have nothing to do with whatever happened. It doesn’t matter to me. Everyone else must feel the same.

If he intends to draw a line for his friend’s sake, then I won’t hold back. I’m going to go in all the way.

“Hey.”

Lin looked up at Banba.

“Tell me stories about your father some time.”

Banba’s face momentarily turned to shock. Lin gazed at his face determinedly. After a few moments passed, Banba made a small smile and nodded, “sure.” Lin was unsure if he got his feelings crossed. However, he got acknowledgement. He would settle with that for today.

Banba then looked over to the sea and pointed at something.

“Ah, they’re back.”

They could see a fishing ship. Martinez and Ricardo were on it. They steered the ship, heading to Sunset Park.

“...That reminds me.” Lin exclaimed. “I left the man over there. Help me carry him.”



They managed to successfully operate the ship and returned to Sunset Park. The Noma Group’s men and the Chinese men were spread out on the ground around the park. Ocho was among them as well. But Banba and Lin were nowhere to be found. Ricardo cocked his head. “Where did those two go?”

“They should be back soon.”

They took all the men and brought them onto the ship, tying them up with rope. They hold Uno and Ocho handcuffed and tied their legs together with rope. They should be unable to move with these restraints.

After Ricardo fastened Ocho to the bit, he reported to the DEA HQ. All that was left to do was wait for reinforcements to arrive and take the men away. When Ricardo put PGS devices on Uno and Ocho for extra measure. Martinez took notice of it. “Hey. Didn’t you say you ran out of spares?”

“Yeah,” Ricardo recalled telling him that. “I lied.”

Martinez smirked at him.

Ricardo cleared his throat and turned his focus back to Uno.

“Why didn’t you kill Uno?” He asked Martinez. “You could have if you wanted to.”

“I told you. I’m not a hitman anymore.”

“If you let him live, Don Ramiro will know of you. He could send assassins after you.”

“You don’t have to worry about him.”

It was not Martinez who answered — it was his friend, Lin.

Ricardo and Martinez both turned around towards the sound of the voice. Lin and Banba stood there. Banba had Treinta hung over his shoulder.

“He’s right.” Banba nodded in agreement. “We’re around, so he’ll be fine. We got no intention of losin’ our slugger.”

“If someone comes after him, we’ll take them down. Just like this.” Lin pointed to Treinta. He had lost the fight, senseless and bloody.

“Oh, good work you guys.” Martinez addressed the pair. “And hold on, Lin!

You're injured too. Are you alright?"

"This isn't that serious." Lin snorted.

"No, it is." Ricardo pointed at Lin's body apprehensively. "You're bleeding from your elbow."

"He hit your ulna nerve, didn't he? Go to the hospital."

Martinez prompted him.

"Alright. I'll drop by Saeki's place."

Lin relented in earnest.

Ricardo handcuffed Treinta and tied him up the same way he did for Uno and Ocho.

"Thank you for your help. You saved us."

Martinez expressed his gratitude to the duo.

"No problem."

"Treat me next time."

Banba and Lin replied with a smile.

"Ah, of course."

The two turned to leave, having finished their part, and began to converse between themselves.

"I'm pretty hungry. After gettin' you seen by Saeki-sensei, how 'bout we go have some ramen and head home."

"I'm not in the mood for it. I'm so out of it from the drug."

"...Drug?" Banba's tone changed. "Lin-chan, when did ya get into such ill-bred pleasures!?"

"You're overreacting. It's just a painkiller!"

As they watched the two leave, Martinez stated proudly. "Our infielders are a lot of fun."

Translation Notes: For Spanish readers, you may notice the Spanish can be a little unnatural at times. For one line, I'd say the Spanish was incorrect. The phrase "to put someone out of their misery/suffering" in Japanese literally translates to something like "to make someone feel better" and the Spanish is based off the literal meaning of the expression. I discussed this with two Spanish speakers, and both seemed to feel it's off but felt it could be understood in context. One suggested, "*te libaré de tu sufrimiento*" would be a better adaptation of the phrase. At the very least, I base the Spanish

translations off of the Spanish to a certain extent but ultimately use the Japanese translations of the Spanish for instances like this.

Extra Inning & Hero Interview

Extra Inning

Gonzales regularly thought working as a DEA agent was not up his alley. While the investigators lose sleep enthralled in their work and risk their lives for their mission, the members of the cartel lived it up day and night. They decked themselves out with golden watches and necklaces, built stately mansions, and drove around in luxurious cars accompanied by women. It was so easy going for them. Gonzales found it more ridiculous to work so hard.

It could be said he fell to the temptation. Gonzales had lost sight of the significance of his job nine years ago. The DEA was primarily focused on the Veracruz cartel at the time, which was trafficking cocaine to America. A young investigator was sent in undercover to catch them. The boss of the Veracruz cartel was a man named Ramiro Sanchez.

Gonzales had considered any possibility he could take to make up to Don Ramiro. If he was in a position where he knew of the details of the agents to their plans on household arrests, he could do anything. With that information as bait, he could live the rest of his life without breaking a sweat.

Gonzales went to Mexico on a day when he was off-duty and dropped by the local bar Ramiro frequented. Ramiro was there, just as the information depicted. One bodyguard was with him. Gonzales recognized the man's face easily. It was the Veracruz executioner, Alex. He was Don Ramiro's most trusted hitmen. He was well-known even within the DEA.

Ramiro sat in the back. It was his special seat. Alex was across from him, eating his meal.

Gonzales walked over to them with bold steps. Noticing his approach, Alex stood up and blocked him, protecting Ramiro.

"Stay away from Don."

Alex ordered threateningly. Killing intent was seeping off of him.

"I need to talk with you, Don Ramiro."

Gonzales spoke around Alex's massive body.

"You have nothing to talk to me about." Ramiro turned him down. "Get out of my sight."

But Gonzales could not back down. “Don’t say that. I’ve got information that would benefit you.”

It was better to cut to the chase. Gonzales continued.

“The courier you have, Louis,” he lowered his voice to a murmur. “He’s an American weasel.”

Ramiro was invested then. He stopped eating and looked over to him. “...An American weasel? What do you mean?”

“You can get that out of him. He specializes in it, right?”

Ramiro tapped his fingers against the table a few times, motioning Alex to sit down. He was interested in what Gonzales was offering him. Alex sat down wordlessly and resumed eating. He’s a loyal dog, Gonzales scoffed internally.

“What do you want?”

Ramiro asked in a low voice.

“First, confirm what I just told you. We can talk more after that.”

“And if you’re right, what do you want from me?”

“I want to team up with your group.” Gonzales spoke even quieter. “I can provide information you want. Where the police are investigating and the day they would perform house arrests. All I ask is to give me compensation for my information. Simple, right?”

Ramiro frowned at him suspiciously. “What are you? Someone from the police?”

“I guess I could be categorized as one.” Gonzales answered ambiguously to hide his identity. “But consider me as an informant.”

Ever since then Gonzales had served as a spy for drug cartels while also working as a DEA agent for the past nine years. After the dismantlement of the Veracruz cartel, he had become a helper of the successors — the Los Eses — reporting the status of investigators and receiving payment as compensation. Other police officers did the same. Gonzales had no ounce of guilt doing this.

He heard that the Los Eses would take up business in Fukuoka only a few weeks ago. They had planned to move to Asia long ago. They had chosen Fukuoka as their base of operations.

There was one issue. A fellow investigator, Ricardo Seiya Ortega, was currently undercover in Fukuoka. The man had a strong sense of justice and held a deep resentment towards drug cartels. If he got the information that the Los Eses

landed in Fukuoka, he was reckless enough to charge in on their deals alone. Gonzales could not allow Ricardo to arrest the Los Eses.

Fortunately though, Ricardo was going to pull out. Gonzales took a flight to Fukuoka right away, so he could take over. And as he expected, Ricardo took action the day of the trade. The Los Eses were attacked during their drug deal, his premonition coming true. Ricardo was behind it. Gonzales got a call from Uno as he stood on stand by in Fukuoka city and immediately rushed over to the pier.

When he arrived at Sunset Park, he saw a man wearing a DEA bullet-proof vest — it was Ricardo.

“Ricardo.”

The man turned around towards his voice.

“Gonzales!” Ricardo’s eyes were wide in shock. “You got to Japan already?”

“Yeah, I just got here yesterday.” He answered before changing the topic.

“More importantly, I got the word from HQ. You did good, agent Ortega. Where are they?”

“They’re over there. I got them handcuffed and tied up.”

“I see,” Gonzales nodded. He had to let them loose right away.

But just then -

“Who are you talking to?”

Another man besides Ricardo showed up.

Wait is he-!?

Gonzales recognized him on the spot. The man had dark skin, a large body, and tattoos on his arms. He could not forget him; it was Alex.

Crap. Gonzales had met him in a bar nine years ago in the Mexican bar. He had seen his face.

I have to shut him up before he realizes who I am.

Gonzales pulled out a gun from his holster and pulled the trigger, aiming for Alex’s large torso.

A gunshot went off. The bullet lodged into Alex’s bullet-proof vest. From this short distance, especially having been shot by a gun with a large barrel, it would hurt despite wearing a bullet-proof vest.

Alex crumbled to the ground, senseless.

“Hey, why did you shoot him!?”

Ricardo yelled.

“Why?” Gonzales shouted back. “Did you lose your mind, Ricardo!? Look at his arms! He’s a villain!”

“I know!” Ricardo lowered his voice. “He’s been helping me.”

“And your allegiance ends here. Arrest him.”

Alex twisted on the ground and moaned. He had regained consciousness.

“Shit...” He glared at Gonzales and muttered in a hoarse voice. “*Gaisi, gaomi-zhe...*”

Alex used words Gonzales did not understand.

“Ricardo,” Gonzales ordered. “Handcuff him.”

“But he’s-”

“Now!” He yelled.

Ricardo reluctantly relented and stepped behind Alex. Gonzales heard the metallic click.

“Alright, that will do.” He nodded. “Let’s get the Eses.”

“They’re over here.”

Ricardo turned on his heel and began walking ahead. They left Alex behind, and after walking down the promenade some distance Gonzales pointed his gun at Ricardo’s back.

“.....”

Ricardo wordlessly stilled.

“Drop your gun.”

Ricardo tossed aside the handgun he had on him as ordered. The black object clamored to the concrete.

“Raise both hands.”

Ricardo slowly turned around, hands up.

“What’s the meaning of this, Gonzales?”

“You haven’t pieced it together?” Gonzales grinned. “I didn’t come here to help you. I came to let the Los Eses escape.”

“...You’re in cahoots with them?”

“Yeah. I heard Uno had a deal going down in Fukuoka. I requested to our superior to let me relieve your position so I could ensure the trade will go smoothly. It won’t do me any good if the Los Eses get arrested. They’re a valuable source of income for me.”

“When?” Ricardo frowned. “Since when did you become the cartel’s dog?”

“Nine years ago.”

Gonzales continued.

“I was the one who tattled to Don Ramiro that you were the traitor. I was able to earn their trust by selling you out.”

“...You shitbag.” Ricardo cursed him, glaring daggers. “I won’t forgive you.”

“It’s unfortunate, Ricardo, but you’re going to die here.”

Gonzales placed his finger on the trigger.

“You caught the Los Eses, but they got the chance and shot you. You died on duty, and they managed to escape. That’s going to be the scenario I give.”

Ricardo snorted. “How dull. You can’t get the Ariel Award under your script.”

“I’m impressed you can crack jokes in your situation.”

“A certain someone rubbed off on me.”

“Got any final words?”

Ricardo nodded.

“Yeah, in fact I do.”

He then looked straight at him and grinned. “See you another time, Gonzales. In prison.”

Before Gonzales could question him, he heard a voice.

“*Adios*, investigator.”

Someone said behind him — it was Alex’s voice.

He was hit by a strong force when he turned around. Alex, who was supposed to be handcuffed, had struck him with a metal pipe. With a full swing of all his might, the metal bat hit Gonzales dead center. Gonzales was blown back, and he slipped over the fence, plummeting into the ocean.

He fully submerged underwater, causing a huge splash. Gonzales thrashed his limbs about. He broke through to the surface and latched onto the concrete. Once his head emerged from the water, the two men were there waiting for him. Ricardo and Alex were looking down at him.

“A finisher, out-of-bounds home run.”

Alex rested the metal pipe against his shoulder and grinned.

“It’s most fitting for a toad to be in water.” Ricardo threw at him.

Gonzales was flabbergasted. He had yet to fully comprehend what had happened. He was thoroughly bewildered.

He questioned them, coughing up water.

“How? How did you-”

How was Alex able to hit him?

“What about the handcuffs!?”

Gonzales knew he heard the handcuffs locking. Alex should be restrained. *How did he accomplish this? Did he have a key on him?*

“I did handcuff him.” Ricardo answered. “Both on his left arm.”

When he mentioned it, Gonzales finally noticed. There was a metal band like bracelet on Alex’s left wrist.

“Wha-” Gonzales was stunned.

The question ‘why’ kept appearing in his mind. Why didn’t Ricardo restrain Alex? Did he see through my true intentions?

“...Did you know I was a traitor?”

“I learned earlier. He told me.” Ricardo pointed to the man beside him with his thumb.

“I recognized your face.” Alex added in his place. “I knew right away. You were the guy that met with Don Ramiro back then. I didn’t expect you to be a DEA agent.”

“But how-”

How did he tell Ricardo I was a traitor?

Alex provided him the answer. “I told him in Chinese so you wouldn’t notice. *Gaomi-zhe* is what we call someone like you — a whistleblower.”

Gonzales recalled the words Alex muttered earlier. Those words he did not understand the meaning of let Ricardo know his true identity.

Alex grabbed his hand and pulled him out of the ocean. He then twisted his wrist back and held him in place. Ricardo put a handcuff on his hands.

“Hey, Rico.” After they restrained Gonzales, Alex smiled proudly, flashing his white teeth. “My Chinese lessons did pay off.”

Hero Interview

A few days later, Martinez met with Ricardo again. The location was at a Mexican restaurant called Volare on Oyafukou street. The restaurant had cheerful salsa music playing in the background, and there were counter seats and tables set up where many foreigners could be seen.

Ricardo sat at the end of the counter. Martinez sat down beside him and

ordered his drink.

The two raised their shots of tequila.

“¡Salud!”

They chugged down the tequila in one go, and after having their drinks refilled Martinez asked. “So why did you call me out here?”

Ricardo was the one who invited him out to eat today.

“I don’t believe I said any thanks,” Ricardo told him after he gulped down his corona beer with a lime slice in it. “Because of you, we were able to capture the Los Eses members as well as a mole in our organization. So thank you.”

The three Los Eses members — Uno, Ocho, and Treinta — had been successfully arrested thanks to Martinez and his friends, and they were able to secure the 300 kilograms of drugs they had planned to traffick. And on top of that, they to reveal the cartel’s dog that acted as he pleased in the DEA for a long period of time.

Due to the foul play the Noma Group did, their dispute with the Chinese group was thoroughly investigated into. Most of the Chinese members had lost their lives, bringing the end to the drug dealing group. And because of that, the smuggling route tying Hong Kong and Fukuoka had been severed. On the other side, the Noma Group had gotten more constrictions by the police for the large dispute they made, resulting in impeding their sales. All in all, everything was going in the right direction.

Ricardo took out a brown envelope and handed it to him. It was fairly thick with what could be assumed were ten thousand yen bills inside. “This is a token of thanks. Take it.”

Martinez shook his head. He did not help Ricardo for money.

“I won’t. I did nothing more than return an old debt.”

He shoved the envelope back over to him, “think of it as consolation money.”

Ricardo put the money away in his pocket. “Ahh, alright. I’ll look past what happened back then.”

“I’d appreciate it.”

“I’ll treat you today. Drink whatever you want.” After telling him that, Ricardo ordered food including chorizo and pickles for them. All the food in this restaurant were high quality.

“...Oh, and about what you asked me.”

After having the appetizers and drinking another beer, Ricardo recalled something and spoke.

"I have a connection to someone in the ICPO. I'll have them make you listed as dead."

"Are you serious?" Martinez exclaimed. "I'd love it if you did that."

"But are you okay not fleeing to somewhere else?"

Uno was still alive. Gonzales could not be the only spy among the investigators. The information that the traitor who sold Don Ramiro out to the CIA, Alex, was living in a far off city in Japan would reach Ramiro in prison. Even behind bars, he could order his men to send assassins after Martinez in Fukuoka. As such, Ricardo tried to convince Martinez to take the DEA's witness protection program, but Martinez refused.

"I don't need it."

Regardless how much danger he was in, he did not want to change names again and flee to another country.

"I don't like running away and hiding." He lift up his corona and sipped it.

"Besides, I like this city. I don't feel like leaving it."

"And you have reliable friends."

"Exactly."

Martinez pointed at Ricardo's face.

"And what are you going to do now?" Martinez asked this time. "Are you going to go back to America?"

"No, I'm going to be staying in this city for a bit longer. As the assigned agent in Fukuoka."

"Then you should stop drinking." Martinez lifted up his beer.

"It's your turn to treat me next."

"Fine by me."

"Let's have sushi next time. That one high quality restaurant in Nakasu."

"Don't ask for too much."

The two looked at each other and laughed.

"If you ever get into trouble, call me." Martinez looked over to Ricardo. "I'll always lend you a hand, partner."

"Yeah," Ricardo nodded and said in response with a smile. "I'm counting on you, Pepe."

It was a good night. After saying goodbye to Ricardo out in front of the restaurant, Martinez headed towards Hakata, cheerfully tipsy. His destination was the Banba Detective Office.

He was carrying a takeout bag of tacos from Volare in his right hand. It was a meager gift as thanks to his infielder teammates for their meritorious deeds days prior. He opened the door to the office with tacos in hand. The door was unlocked.

“Hey, sorry for the intrusion-”

“What the hell!”

The moment Martinez stepped inside, he heard Lin’s yell.

“How many times did I tell you to go out and buy it!?”

Martinez was dumbfounded, unsure what was going on. He sobered up instantly at Lin’s menacing voice.

“It’s not my fault. I just forgot.” Banba bit back. He also was irritated.

Martinez peered into the office. Banba and Lin were having an argument, standing in the center of the room facing each other. It was far from peaceful.

“You always forget it! Get yourself together!”

“I’ve had enough.” Banba covered his ears, grimacing. “Do ya have to chew me out just for forgettin’ some toilet paper?”

“How about you reflect on your faults!?” Lin bore his teeth and shouted, throwing a cushion at the other’s face. “Idiot Ban!”

“Ow! What was that for!?”

The verbal argument escalated to a scuffle. Lin grabbed Banba’s hair and pulled at it and pinched his cheek with his left. Similarly, Banba grabbed Lin by the collar with his right hand and grasped Lin by the wrist with his other hand.

“Jeez, these guys...” Martinez shrugged, watching Banba and Lin fight with demon-like features, and sighed. “Guess they do say, *mientras más se pelean, más se quieren.*” (The more they fight, the more they get along).

That said, he could not let them continue fighting.

“Hey, come on you guys. Calm down.”

He peeled the two off each other.

“Don’t fight. I can at least go buy toilet paper for you.”

Martinez turned around and ran over to the nearest convenient store.

GAME SET

GAME SET



Afterword

I did use real places, organizations, and events as reference in this series, but this is entirely fiction. The events in this story have no correlation to real places and events. Please take this in mind.

And so, we are already on the sixth volume! Time sure goes by fast...

And this time I decided to have our slugger José Martinez be the lead. Martinez is one of my favorite characters as I love Latin-American culture. He may not be as popular among you readers, but this work was written for any single person who thought 'Mar-san is cool!' I hope I at least got to show his appeal.

Following the fifth volume this one ended up being comedic from beginning to end, but I feel this is more of a Martinez spin-off, so I hope you enjoyed this man's light-hearted tale.

I have had a lot of help for this novel from many people. Starting with Wada-sama and Endou-sama in the editing department and to the illustrator Hako Ichihiro-sama and everyone who helped publish this work, I am deeply grateful. Thank you so much!

This time I had used Spanish and had requested the translations from Spanish teacher I. Thank you for even translating the coarse slang. I-sensei, *muchas gracias*!

And then to the readers. Thank you for purchasing this novel! I am sorry it took a bit of time for the next addition to come out. I will be working hard to get more works done for you this year, so I hope you will look forward to it!

And lastly, an announcement. The manga adaptation for Hakata Tonkotsu Ramens that has been serialized in monthly GFantasy has its first volume released today! Please look out for the Tonkotsu Nine in Kisara Akino-sensei's wonderful comic adaptation!

And now, until next time! ¡Adios!

Chiaki Kisaki